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THE LAST OF SHEILA

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Novelization by **Alexander Edwards**
of an original screenplay by
Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins

Starring
(In alphabetical order)
Richard Benjamin, Dyan Cannon, James Coburn, Joan Hackett, James Mason, Ian McShane, Raquel Welch

THE OBJECT OF THE GAME IS . . . LOSING

Clinton Greene had a passion for games—parlor games, chess, Scrabble, puzzles. When he invited a select group on a cruise aboard his yacht, they expected to play the game—whatever one he'd planned.

But there was something unusual about this trip. It was to take place on the anniversary of the death of Clinton's wife, Sheila—and everyone on the guest list had also been his guests that harrowing night Sheila was run down by a speeding car that fled into the darkness.

Before the voyage was over, they would all discover the gruesome purpose of the party and the party game, and that the prize for winning was DEATH.

THE LAST OF SHEILA

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SHEILA

CHAPTER I

The *Sheila* rode at anchor, stern to the quay, stern lines fastened securely over the bollards. The Mediterranean sun glanced off the brightwork and made of the white hull a dazzling blur. Her eighty-seven feet dwarfed the sleek ketch on her port side, a racing vessel owned by the pretender to the Spanish throne, but the *Sheila* was in her turn outclassed by the ninety-five-footer on her starboard, a powerful yacht belonging to a South African diamond billionaire. The Palma marina was, as usual in the summer, crowded with the pleasure craft of the wealthy, berthed as tightly together as possible, their anchor chains frequently fouling.

Lee Parkman swung her long slender legs out of the taxicab and stood somewhat shakily on the quay, shielding her eyes from the too-bright noonday sun that pierced even through the lenses of her

oversized sunglasses. Her legs still felt rubbery from the long, bumpy ride over the dusty roads that led from the Palma Airport to the marina. Mallorca was like that, she thought. The paradox of modern airport and luxurious anchorage linked by an ancient and ill-kept road.

Lee gazed up appreciatively at the *Sheila*'s fine lines. A twelve-foot gangplank, all rich cabinetwork and heavy, bright chrome, linked the yacht to her mooring like a giant umbilicus. Dark-haired young men, two of them, young and muscular, were carrying crates of liquor and cartons of canned goods up the rubber-wheeled gangway and onto the deck. Behind her, the old Citroën taxi pulled away; Lee's husband Tom stood checking over their luggage.

"Why has Clinton asked us here?" wondered Lee to herself. Why, out of the blue, had he bidden them—commanded them—in his accustomed imperious way, to be his guests for a week of fun and games aboard his yacht in the Mediterranean? Clinton Greene never did anything without a reason, and it was usually a selfish reason. Could this time be different? Could this be the break Tom needed so badly, the golden chance that would bring Tom Parkman's name to life again in the industry?

The sun wasn't allowed into the library of the Santa Barbara house; the blinds were drawn tightly against it, keeping the large, book-paneled room in near-darkness. Lee knocked and stood for a few seconds outside the closed door, until she heard "Come in," then she turned the handle and walked inside. Tom sat hunched over his desk, his dark hair gleaming in the single pool of light cast by the desk

lamp. On the polished desk-top in front of him, a film script lay spread, its shuffled pages covered with penciled notations and scribbled comments. Lee hesitated to disturb him, but, as Tom looked up and smiled warmly at her, she waved the telegram at him.

"Guess what? One guess."

"Your father has had his body defrosted into life, and he wants this house back." Tom's voice held that teasing quality Lee always responded to.

"Almost." She wrinkled her nose at him. "Clinton requests our attendance on his yacht for a week."

The grin faded instantly from Tom's handsome face, replaced by an anxious furrow between his thick black brows. "No kidding." He reached out and grabbed the telegram from Lee, reading it himself. "Oh, God, could it be?"

"I wouldn't count on it," his wife replied calmly. "No, I think he's just bored and wants to play parlor games."

Tom leaned back in his chair, the frown fading. "Ever the dreamer," he teased. "But we'll go anyway." He glanced up at Lee, trying to read her mood.

She gave a slight shrug of her slim shoulders, her enormous brown eyes searching his. "Okay" was all she replied.

"Can I have a sip of that?" Tom asked, reaching for the tall, pale brown drink in Lee's hand.

"It's flat. Ginger ale. Do you want me to get you one?"

Tom nodded absently, his eyes fixed on the framed photo on his desk: Clinton and Tom posed

together jauntily, arms thrown around each other's shoulders in a stance of mock formality, holding their croquet mallets crossed like sabres.

Lee started out of the room. As she passed the television set by the door, her hand fell on it idly. It was warm. Suddenly she knew that Tom had not been working, another long day of not working. He had been sitting in the dark, slumped in his desk chair, morosely watching some flickering ghost of an old movie—maybe even one of his—on TV. She knew with certainty that he'd rushed to click off the set and switch on the light at her knock. A sympathetic anguish gripped her, and she turned back to face him, her voice holding a gentle plea.

"Tom, write something new. Forget 'Freakshow.' Clinton's never going to produce it and he's never going to give it back to you."

"Probably." Tom's agreement was muffled. He swiveled his chair around so that he wouldn't have to face Lee, wouldn't have to see the concern in her eyes or listen to the pity in her voice. Clinton, he thought. Clinton. What is it you want of me? Why are you summoning me now? It's been such a long time.

"Let's board," Lee was saying.

"Don't want to leave the luggage." He gestured at the neat pile of brown suitcases and carry-ons. "And I ain't carrying it three feet."

"Your back okay?"

"So far."

Lee sighed. "I say a little prayer that it stays that way and that Clinton stays in a good mood." She

looked around the berth and across the quay. "Where is everybody? You don't think they're all below playing Sardines or something?"

"I'll bet Clinton's got games planned for every day," Tom grinned.

His wife smiled faintly in answer. "Just so long as he sticks to days and leaves us some nights to ourselves."

Tom moved toward her and slipped one arm easily around her shoulder, blowing a kiss across her neat black hair. The sound of an engine made them both turn. Clinton's silver-painted Rolls was pulling smoothly up to the dock. All four doors opened, and five people trooped out, chattering and blinking behind sunshades in the strong Mallorca sun. Like a sardonic shepherd, wearing a dapper blazer of nautical cut and snow-blinding flannel slacks above tasseled loafers, Clinton Greene herded his guests over to the yacht, a grin of pride on his face.

"It's a mistake!" screamed Christine, as she saw the gleaming hull stretching ahead of her for nearly ninety feet. She squealed in envy. A quarter of a million bucks on the hoof, she calculated, that is, if boats had hooves. Her guess was on the low side by at least a hundred thousand. Christine had no idea of the value of the latest electronic equipment in the deckhouse and belowdecks. Vosper stabilizers don't come cheap, nor do twin fifty-two-horsepower Mercedes Benz twelve-cylinder diesels. Not to mention two motor launches, central air conditioning, Loran, three radiophones, a depth-finder, the autopilot, a fresh-water maker, two radars, transistorized alarms systems, and electronic safety devices. *And*

two seventy-five-kilowatt generators. Inside that white-painted hull of triple-planked mahogany, the *Sheila* had everything.

"What do you think, kids?" crowed Clinton. "Thrilled, pleased, disappointed?"

"It's really fabulous, Clinton," enthused Anthony, too quickly and too loudly.

"You like it?" Clinton's grin broadened.

"Fabulous," Anthony repeated, drowning out everybody's concurrence.

"Vittorio!" Clinton shouted for the cabin steward.

Alice strolled over to Tom and Lee with the exaggerated walk that photographed on-screen like a tiger's prowl.

"Hi! How was your flight?"

"Hi," replied Lee, then turned her attention to Christine. The two women stood looking at each other for a beat. Lee's quiet glance took in the heavy, improbably heavy, mane of bleached hair tumbling around Christine's shoulders in a style that went out with the 1960s and Baby Jane Holzer. Several thick gold chains were looped around Christine's neck and down over her full Pucci-clad bosom. Chunky gold bangles circled her wrists, and gold hoops glittered in her ears. Christine's face was a deep Hollywood tan, the kind of tan that turns the faces of women "of a certain age" to leather and etches wrinkles around the eyes. Christine wore, in addition to a generous amount of not-subtle makeup, three sets of false eyelashes, two on her upper lid and one below. Everything about her was too much.

In her turn, Christine surveyed the slim, cool woman in front of her. Lee wore a pale beige long jacket knitted of string and trimmed with wooden buttons over a string dirndl skirt that reached an inch below her knees. Christine gritted her teeth because she didn't recognize the designer, but she knew contemporary and expensive when she saw it, and she enviously (and correctly) surmised that she could buy two Puccis for the price of that simple summer suit. Lee's only jewelry was a wedding band and, on her right hand, a large emerald framed in an Art Deco diamond setting. The emerald had been her mother's. Lee's hair was cut almost short and swung with geometric smoothness whenever she turned her sleek, dark head.

"I didn't know you were coming," Lee remarked with cool disdain.

"But you're thrilled about it. I can tell." Christine made no effort to mask the heavy sarcasm.

"I'm delighted," replied Lee with a thin smile. "Clinton can take his frustrations out on you."

"And he's always sorry afterwards." Christine turned, cooing, to Clinton. "Aren't you, lover?"

But Clinton wasn't paying attention. He was busy giving orders to the crew and acting the Yachtsman in front of the captain, a short and rather portly Italian who stood patiently by with his hands folded. Clinton turned back to his guests, waving one arm in imperious command.

"All right, people, let's line up by the prow."

"What is this, a pogrom?" Christine complained.

"When do you wish to sail, Signor Greene?" the captain asked quietly.

"When do I wish to sail! Let's get out of this toilet toot sweet."

"Toot sweet is right." Anthony always rushed to agree with Clinton.

"Anthony took me to Cap d'Antibes during the film festival," purred the phenomenal Alice.

"And she dove into a floating melon," finished her husband.

"If that's the Mediterranean, give me Laguna," opined Alice languidly.

"Come on, come on." Clinton was herding his guests impatiently down the dock to the prow of the *Sheila.* He began lining them up, positioning them fussily, and checking them out in his camera's viewfinder.

"No. Husbands and wives separate. Lee, between Alice and Anthony. Philip, you there. Tom, the other side of Christine. For balance." Clinton squinted at the group, composing the picture in his imagination. They stood, a mixed grouping of Hollywood types, posing with broad smiles on the quay by the prow of the yacht. Above their heads, the name *Sheila* gleaming in gold paint on the hull.

"Left profile, love," muttered Anthony to Alice. She obeyed automatically. She always obeyed Anthony. That is, almost always.

Alice Wood was the last name in the world you'd decide on for the curvaceous animal who now turned her renowned left profile to Clinton's Polaroid. Alice was a name you associated with the color blue, and demure violets and starched and

ruffled pinafores. Whereas this Alice was a tigress pure and simple, a devourer of flesh. She had burst on the astonished public in tiny, laughable roles that required her to wear tiny, laughable scraps of cloth on a body that would not quit. Her incredibly small waist, her large and shapely breasts, her long sexy legs, arched nose, sensuous mouth, and auburn shower of silken hair had blinded every man in sight to the fact that she couldn't act her way out of a stash box. Her husband, named Anthony Blondin but resigned to being called Anthony Wood, had efficiently managed Alice's career every hip-rolling step of the way, making certain that her publicity was as large as her talent was small, and shutting his eyes to Alice's own efforts to better her chances, efforts she made effortlessly in bed with the right people. Between his proposals and her propositions, the tiger had clawed its way to near-stardom, and Alice's hungry face and ravishing figure were by now familiar the world over.

They stood in the souvenir shop of the Rome Airport. As the reporters crowded around, and the paparazzi got their flashbulbs ready, Alice loaded her arms with stuffed animal toys from the counter, cuddly pandas and teddies, and a pink pussycat with feathery whiskers.

"Ready, love," muttered Anthony, gesturing at the photographers. "Ready, gentlemen?" He pushed aside the huge Cognac bottle that a mustached man was trying to press into Alice's hands. "No, grazie."

Alice spun around with a broad smile, facing the battery of newsmen. Her dress was cut almost to the

navel. In her arms the stuffed animals looked cuddly and soft, giving her face a phony but sexy girlishness, a fact of which she was well aware. The flashbulbs popped with soft implosions as the newsmen pressed closer, calling out questions and scribbling on their pads.

"Do you enjoy Rome?"

"Do I!" breathed Alice with throaty conviction. "I enjoy Rome for countless reasons!"

"Then why do you leave?" asked a second reporter.

"Well," Alice said, killing them with one of her smiles, "I've just finished my picture starring with Kirk Douglas" (the old plugola) "and I'm exhausted. And, the heat!" She fanned her incredible bosom with a stuffed monkey. All the men present wanted to be the monkey.

"Where do you go?"

"For a week in the Mediterranean. On the yacht of a famous producer." She leaned forward to hug her husband; plush animals fell like furry rain all over the souvenir-shop floor. "But I'm not afraid," Alice dimpled, clutching Anthony. "My husband will protect me."

Anthony's too-handsome face broke into a brief, chilly smile. He gently disentangled himself from Alice and the stuffed toys. "Right, but I'm afraid our plane will leave without us, so if you gentlemen will excuse us . . ." he dismissed the press conference.

As the last few photographs were snapped, the man with the Cognac bottle renewed his attempts to give it to Alice. Anthony frowned and intercepted it. "No, grazie," he repeated, more firmly. He grabbed

Alice's arm and hurried her through the airport lounge toward the departure gate. The Cognac man raced at their side, his face anxious, his hands still trying to force the bottle on Alice. Furious, Anthony shoved the smaller man away with some force; the man stumbled and nearly fell, his arms waving wildly for balance.

"Oh, Bunny, he didn't mean anything . . ." Alice's beautiful face wore a look of loving reproach.

"He certainly did," Anthony snapped, his London barrow boy's cheap accent crackling through the usual veneer of his voice. "You don't do commercials for liquor companies."

"Why can't we just go on a vacation like people?" Alice sighed. She thought of the week ahead of her. Would there possibly be peace and quiet? Or would Clinton be up to his old game-playing tricks? She shivered slightly at a sudden remembrance. They hadn't seen Clinton since that awful night a year ago, that night when poor Sheila . . . Alice shrugged away the thought as they boarded the Palma plane.

Clinton grinned wolfishly as he studied the little group caught in his camera lens. All of them had wide, gleaming grins pasted on their faces except Philip. Philip looked uneasy; his handsome graying brows puckered into a frown. Oh, Philip, baby, if you only knew, sweetheart, what you are in for this week, what you are *all* in for this week . . . Clinton's finger sought the release button of the camera.

The sound stage was tiny, the smallest that Philip Dexter had ever worked on. It was hard to get it completely silent; through some faulty window

somewhere the street noises of traffic-burdened London drifted to his ears. He felt very old and very foolish sitting in a canvas director's chair like C. B. De Mille, directing—had it come to this?—a dog food commercial, with the sponsor watching. He surveyed the set. Four little girls, each about eight, stood holding up cans of the product and trying to look as though they would enjoy a dish of it themselves. Philip cast glances at their thin arms poking out of the dainty sleeves and their spindly, childish little legs beneath the short, fluffy skirts. He sighed. Perhaps his next dog-food commercial would be luckier. Perhaps he'd only have to work with dogs.

They began to rehearse. Each of the little girls had only one line to deliver, and each delivered it in a shrieking, piercing, treble voice.

"Britain's!" piped the first one.

"Best!" chimed in the second.

"BOW-WOWS!" yelled the third.

"Bark." Philip supplied quietly.

"FOR BOFFERS!" came the screaming climax.

Philip shuddered inwardly as he compared the squeaks with other voices echoing in the chamber of his memory. The low-pitched, nasal, sexy Stanwyck, the husky, unique Jean Arthur, the clear tones of Liz Taylor, and the incomparable Dietrich . . .

"Good." Philip smiled with bright, false enthusiasm. "Again, please."

As the little girls began to chirrup the commercial again, an assistant interrupted.

"Phone, Mr. Dexter. Your wife."

Repressing a twitch of irritation, Philip took up the receiver.

"Hello, darling . . . From whom? . . . Oh, good God . . . When?"

A door at the rear of the sound stage opened and another little girl, the missing barker, came in and stood shyly in front of Philip.

"Bark," she yipped quietly.

Philip placed one hand over the mouthpiece, smiling down at the pretty child. "Very good," he smiled. He called her to him with a silent gesture and, still listening to his wife, he bent down and arranged the little girl's frock, smoothing the dress over her narrow hips and tiny rump.

"Well," he snapped peevishly into the phone, "send back a confirming wire from us both . . . very well, then, from me . . ."

The child squirmed in Philip's embrace.

"Bark. Bark."

From the corner of his eye, Philip could see the sponsor's representative tapping his watch impatiently. He pushed the little girl away and spoke to his wife.

"Got to hang up, darling. One of the cast is peeing on my leg, something Dietrich never did to me, even at her moodiest . . . 'Bye, now."

He hung up and turned to the sponsor with an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry." Then, nervously touching the silk scarf knotted at his neck and smoothing back his gray, longish sideburns, he smiled brightly at his diminutive cast.

"And once again, girls, wave the tins. A bit more spirit. Here we go."

As the girlish voices chorused the inanities of the commercial, Philip let his mind wander. A week aboard ship with Clinton. What could any of it mean? Could there be a comeback in it for Philip, the beginning of a new phase of success and wealth? Or had Clinton some other, perhaps more diabolical plan? Clinton had grown more erratic after that night Sheila died, the night her broken body had been found at the side of the road, filthy tire-marks on her red chiffon hostess gown. The blood hadn't shown up well against the color of the dress, Philip remembered. Not until it had dried and turned brown.

He shook his head to clear it, then smiled broadly at the sponsor as he waved his hand enthusiastically in time to the sound of girls barking.

Just as Clinton was about to snap the picture, Christine lowered her glasses and stared at a strapping and muscular teenage cabin boy, who was ferrying her luggage up the gangplank.

"Attention avec le slant-board, *chéri,"* she called seductively.

"He's Italian," snapped Clinton, annoyed.

Christine rolled her eyes in mock despair. "I took the wrong three weeks at Berlitz," she complained. "All I know is *scusi* and *pronto.*"

"Pronto will be enough," remarked Lee drily.

Christine's office in Beverly Hills looked as though she'd fought a battle royal with a fag decorator and both of them had lost. A Chinese screen stood in one corner, flanked by a tall, standing pair

of imitation T'ang vases. On the wall opposite the large window hung a Navajo blanket, the latest thing in expensive decoration. This piece of authentic Indian art had set Christine back fifteen hundred dollars and was very little different from the ones you could buy at the side of the road in the Southwest for thirty. Her desk was Directoire and covered with copies of the trade, but the chair was pure Bauhaus, and the finishing touches took the form of dozens of framed and signed photographs of substars, stars, and superstars like Yul Brynner and Virna Lisi that grinned down from the other two walls. The lesser the star, the longer and more effusive was the inscription.

Christine scribbled frantically on a pad in front of her, clutching the receiver to her ear with one hunched shoulder.

"Don't be silly, Clinton," she shouted into the mouthpiece, "you sound like you're right around the corner! Are you really *talking from the boat? . . . Uh-huh . . . who else besides me? Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . Both of them, or just him? Oh, good, the Scrabble set. Tee-hee. Name eight Polish patriots beginning with the letter W . . . Who else? Well, that's different. Of course I'll come, we've been trying to sign her for months."*

She broke off abruptly, furious with herself at her slip. Then she thrust her receiver at arm's length and scratched one mandarin fingernail furiously over the receiver, producing a static sound in the listener's ear.

"What? This connection is ridiculous! I said I've been dying to see you for months! Listen, how about

Bridey Murphy, is she coming? What do you mean, what do I mean? Minus your usual fifty dress extras, this is the same B group that was at your house the night Sheila got bounced through the hedges . . . Well, I'm giving it to Joyce Haber: 'Clinton Greene's Anniversary Wake' . . . That's what I said, it's not right for Haber, we'll just keep it our secret instead. Loved your wire, can't wait to see you. I've lost fifty pounds, I'm a hollow reed. Kiss kiss."

Christine replaced the receiver and sat for a moment, tapping at one perfectly capped front tooth with a long, blood-red fingernail. Then she addressed her assistant, a dumpy, middle-aged woman in sensible shoes, a mannish bob, and a business suit, who had been busily watering the plants as she overheard every word of the conversation.

"Call Haber and give her the dish," Christine snapped. "Disguise your voice as a woman." She picked up the telegram from the desk and read it aloud. " 'My year of mourning being over . . .'? Who's he kidding? We went to Streisand's opening at the Sands directly from the cemetery."

Christine leaned back in her modern chair and thought of that night, remembering the shock and the horror of Sheila's sudden death, the huddled, crumpled body at the side of the road, the police demanding answers to questions about the make and model of the car that had struck her. And why had Sheila been out of the house and running down the road at that hour of the night? It was a question Christine had asked herself again and again over the course of the last twelve months. But there was never an answer.

"Squeeze in closer, everybody, or you'll be out of the picture." Clinton bared his teeth in what passed for a smile. "And I don't mean *this* one."

Tom stared into the camera lens without seeing. His thoughts raced wildly through his brain, a jumble of half-formed ideas and anxieties, and questions as yet unasked. Did this "pleasure cruise" have anything to do with his own screenplay, "Freakshow"? Did Clinton have plans of his own that he would reveal at the worst possible moment, as he so enjoyed doing? Clinton had always been unfathomable, but ever since Sheila's death . . . well, he'd become too strange for comprehension.

Tom winced involuntarily, remembering Sheila's death. In his mind's eye he saw the two bodies locked together in a passionate embrace, heard Sheila's astonished cry of rage as she recognized the lovers. Then the words tumbling from her red-painted lips, a torrent of filthy abuse that betrayed her hurt and her low origins alike. Again he saw the whirl of red chiffon as she turned away, her face a distorted and ugly mask of wretchedness. He heard the door slam and, a few minutes later, the sound of a car's engine roaring past the house.

When Sheila had not returned in the next hour, a number of them had gone out looking for her, a small group of half-tight guests combing the roads of luxurious Bel Air at three in the morning, playing it like another game. They had left the Maseratis and the Porsches, the Jags and the Rolls in the driveway and had wandered out on foot, like high-school kids on a paper chase. It was a grim chase, thought Tom, grim turning to grisly when they actually found her

body, only a few hundred yards from the house, thrown into the bushes at the side of the road by an unknown automobile.

And since that night a year ago when his wife Sheila had been killed by a hit-and-run driver, Clinton had turned odder and odder. Which was in itself an oddity, thought Tom. Because Clinton had hated Sheila's guts.

The shutter clicked, preserving their falsely happy image for posterity. "Perfect," called Clinton. "A study of six hungry failures. I'm *kidding*, gang."

"When you sign with me," muttered Christine to Alice out of the side of her mouth, "he'll watch his Jewish mouth." Then, loudly, to mask her mutter, she called out, "When's lunch?"

Clinton ignored her. As the last of the luggage—Christine's matching pink cases and the Parkmans' dull brown ones—were carried on board, he clapped his hands. "Okay, everybody, Vittorio"—he drawled the name affectedly—"is going to show you where your cabins are."

Christine eyed the brown suitcases hungrily. "God, I hate my luggage more than life! Whose is that?"

"Ours," said Lee with a lift of her brow.

"Vuitton? From rewriting spaghetti Westerns?" Christine was plainly dubious.

Alice turned to Anthony. "What's Vwee-tone?" She asked in an undertone.

"Good," he replied.

"Well, it looks tacky." She wrinkled her world-famous nose in mild distaste. "Couldn't they get Gucci?"

Christine rolled her eyes at Philip, gesturing at Alice. "That's what one picture in Rome will do for you."

"She only respects what she can pronounce," was the amused reply.

The yacht was even more luxurious aboard than it had appeared from the quay. The teak decks gleamed with waxing, the brightwork was polished to a painful shine. Clinton—accompanied by Vittorio—showed them over the yacht proudly; from bow to stern she was a thing of beauty and the kind of luxury that only a very, very large income could take for granted.

They crowded into the ship's lounge, preceded by Vittorio, who had thrown open the door with a flourish. It was a knockout, about thirty feet long by almost twenty feet wide, furnished comfortably with many deep chairs and several sofas, bookcases, a bridge table set with a backgammon board, a large coffee table. Against one wall stood a fully appointed and well-stocked bar. Opposite the bar an upright piano waited open with music strewn on the bench. And there were games everywhere: jigsaw puzzles, decks of cards, Scrabble sets, Monopoly and Parcheesi, chess and checker sets, Chinese checker boards and marbles, even an elaborate and costly Mah-Jongg game with genuine ivory tiles.

Clinton's guests looked around the game-room, almost speechless. As Clinton tacked up the Polaroid photo of them on the bulletin board above the bar, Lee asked dryly, "Who did this room? Parker Brothers?"

Clinton grinned. "Sometimes it rains," was all he

said. But he was thinking of the Game and how they would react to it. "All right, everybody down to the latrine for shave, shower, or douche. Depending on your hangup."

THE GAME

WILL BEGIN EVERY NIGHT

AT

8.00 p. m. SHARP

CHAPTER II

The forward staterooms were as luxurious as the suites of any good small hotel on the Continent. As Vittorio pushed open the door to Alice's and Anthony's cabin, the others crowded in behind to see. Alice ran to the huge, ornate bed with carved headboard and brocade bedspread and began to bounce on the firm mattress, her breasts jiggling. She looked around at the baroque, gilt-framed mirrors and pictures and at the walls, which were covered in the same brocade fabric as the bed. It was an ultra-feminine room, in the most whorish possible taste.

"It's really beautiful," enthused Alice, impressed by its cost and splendor.

"Louis the Thirty-fourth," commented Philip drily.

"It's like your mother's," whispered Tom to Lee.

Lee gave him a scornful glance. "It's like her maid's," she said with quiet contempt.

Clinton was clapping his hands again, like a ringmaster at a group of trained seals. "Come on, come on, let's get this show on the road."

Leaving Alice still bouncing and Anthony busily unpacking, the rest of them moved down the stateroom corridor, following Clinton as he rapidly threw doors open on either side, assigning staterooms.

"You," he said to Christine, almost pushing her into a spacious modern cabin, very different from Alice's but comfortable and well-furnished.

"You," he said to Philip, ushering him into a cabin the equal of Christine's.

"You and you have to share a john," Clinton informed Lee and Tom. "Get to know each other." He flung open the doors to two small cabins with a connecting bath. Lee's cabin was next door to Alice; on the other side of the little bathroom was Tom's.

Lee walked into her room and dropped her handbag on the narrow, single bunk bed. The cabin was tiny; there was barely enough room for the bed and a small dresser. She opened the bathroom door; it swung back with a loud bang against the cabin door, there was so little room between them. Her lips parted in a wry smile, and, running her hands through her luxuriant short dark hair, she gave her head a shake. She explored the bathroom which, being even more tiny than the cabin, only took a second, then opened the door to Tom's cabin, continuing on her grand tour. Tom's room was identical

in every way to Lee's, even to the banging of the john door. Outside, Lee could hear voices, as Clinton made the rounds of his guests.

"Okay?"

"Parfait," replied Philip.

"Okay?"

"Where does the crew sleep?" That was Christine, wanting to know.

Tom was unpacking. Lee brushed past him and sat on his single bunk. She reached for a cigarette and lighted it silently, surveying Tom with her large brown eyes as he moved from suitcase to dresser. Every time he passed her, she had to move her long legs out of his way.

Finally, Tom, uncomfortable with her silence, burst out, "Look. Alice and Anthony got the double because Clinton didn't want her sulking for six days."

Lee stubbed out her cigarette. "And because he knew *you* wouldn't sulk."

"With Clinton everything is points, understand? *Do* you understand?"

"Too well." Lee's voice was calm, but Tom could detect the bitter edge beneath its coolness.

"I don't *mind* Clinton, you know," Lee continued. "I just don't like him running our lives."

They both flinched as a sudden blast of music blared through the wall of Lee's cabin from Alice's side, traveling through the open door of the bathroom and into Tom's room. It was Mick Jagger singing the chorus of "Poison Ivy."

"Oh, good," remarked Lee sarcastically. "They brought their cassette player." She glanced at Tom,

who met her eyes. They broke into a smile simultaneously, rueful smiles accompanied by small "what-the-hell" shrugs of resignation. Turning as a small knock sounded at Tom's door, they saw Guido, the handsome cabin boy, standing in the doorway holding a small tray with glasses, bottles, and ice.

"Bottle water?" he enquired.

"Over here, hon," called Christine. "Cabin five-oh, *capeesh?*" She appeared in the hall, wearing wide palazzo pants in a vivid print pattern, and took the tray from the boy's hands. She gave him a few small pats, sending him out the door, then stepped inside Tom's room. "Nice ass," Christine purred as she closed the door behind her and bolted it, "but I think he's afraid of me." Then her face lost its lecherous grin. "Now, I want to talk to you very seriously," she said to the mystified Parkmans. "Why do you think we're all here?"

"Clinton's project?" asked Tom.

"Uh-huh. Right," nodded Christine.

"Which is?" pursued Tom.

Christine drew a deep breath. "Well," she revealed in a hoarse near-whisper, "he's been hinting about making a movie about the life and death of Sheila Greene."

Her words were met with stunned silence as Christine smiled in triumph. Then Lee gasped out, "That's truly bizarre!"

"No, no, not really," said Tom slowly. "She's still a compulsive subject with Clinton."

"But he never really cared for her," protested Lee.

"He cared very much about her real estate holdings—upon which we're sailing right now," put in Christine.

"Finding the guy who hit her is just another unsolved game for him," Lee pointed out.

"Absolutely," Christine agreed. "But what a game! And now, Tom gets to write it, Philip gets to direct it, and what's-her-face, I mean my new client Miss Alice Wood, thrills you as Sheila Greene, who . . ."

"Who rose . . ." put in Tom.

"Who rose from . . ." continued Christine.

"Call girl . . ."

"Call girl to . . ."

"Columnist . . ."

"Call girl to columnist," finished Christine. "Terrific, huh? Just do me this. Minutes from now, when Clinton talks about this, and he will, be surprised." She unlocked the door and slipped out, leaving Tom and Lee to look at each other in wonderment and growing doubt.

The lights in the lounge were shaded against glare, and through the portholes the moonlight could be seen rippling on the water, as purple as a Maxfield Parrish print.

The guests clustered around the bar, filling their hands with the iced glasses passed out by Vittorio, and nibbling from several trays of canapés. Occasionally they glanced curiously at a large blank scoreboard that stood on an easel near the bar. It read:

	Philip	Christine	Tom	Lee	Alice	Anthony
Mon.						
Tues.						
Wed.						
Thurs.						
Fri.						
Sat.						

On the bulletin board over the bar Clinton was posting a typewritten card which stated: "The Game Will Begin Every Night at 8:00 P.M. Sharp."

"I'm thinking of calling it . . . don't be shocked . . . 'The Last of Sheila,' " Clinton was saying as he drove a push-pin through the card. "Fox is interested . . . Paramount is interested. It's a perfect woman's picture, every bit as big as 'Love Story.' "

Alice fixed him with a look. "Only she never gets to play that good hospital scene."

Anthony moved closer to his wife, putting his arm around her shoulder in apparent affection, but giving her a surreptitious hard pinch to shut her up. He turned his large green eyes on Clinton, making his expression as earnest as he could. "Clinton, it's the picture we've been waiting for—if we're available."

Clinton glanced contemptuously at the tall, tanned Anthony, whose heavy shoulders strained the raw silk jacket buttoned over the Italian shirt. "Provided they're not opening a new shopping center in Anaheim, you will be," he returned with a bitchy grin.

As Vittorio came back with fresh trays of hors d'oeuvres and passed them around, Clinton checked his Rolex. "Uh-oh. Only two hours to Game Time. Let me describe the week's entertainment." His eyes gleamed as he took a handful of white envelopes from his blazer pocket. On each envelope was a typewritten name.

"The last time I played a game was Charades at . . ." Alice broke off, momentarily flustered.

"At my house a year ago," finished Clinton smoothly. "The night Sheila was killed."

The group fell silent as they exchanged embarrassed glances.

"In fact," continued Alice slowly and thoughtfully as she looked around the lounge, "everybody here . . ."

"Was there," interrupted Clinton. "Except Lee." He turned to Lee. "You were home sick in Santa Barbara. You said."

"No," replied Lee coolly. "I was home sick *of* Santa Barbara. I said."

"I like any game where you don't have to move," remarked Philip, to change the subject.

"Well, you don't have to move for this one," said Clinton. "If you're smart enough."

"Meaning?"

Clinton smiled enigmatically, his eyes narrowed. "It's sort of . . . I call it the Sheila Greene Memorial Gossip Game."

"Are there prizes?" Alice wanted to know.

"Sounds fascinating," complimented Anthony at the same time.

"And I haven't even described it yet," Clinton remarked too sweetly to Anthony.

Vittorio offered the canapé tray to Christine. Three caviar rounds were left. Christine smiled brightly at him, waving one languid paw, fingers sparkling with rings.

"I couldn't. I'm stuffed."

Vittorio nodded his sleek dark head and began to move on. Christine's hand shot out like a snake and gripped his sleeve, stopping the steward in his tracks. "Can't you take a joke?" she brayed. Helping herself to all three canapés, she wolfed them down. Clinton watched her, annoyed. He raised his voice, commanding their full attention.

"I've dreamed up six 'secrets,' one for each of you. Six little pretend pieces of gossip." Reading the names off the envelopes, he passed one out to each of his guests with the warning, "Keep them secret!"

"Gimme, gimme," chortled Alice.

"Can we look at them?" asked Lee.

"It'll help," replied Clinton sarcastically.

"How do you think these things up?" admired Anthony.

Clinton was pleased. "It's only taken me a month to prepare, said he modestly," he said.

For a moment nobody spoke as six pairs of hands busily tore open the envelopes and pulled out the cards, and six pairs of eyes read the words typed on them. Only Clinton knew what each one contained, and he looked at his guests' faces closely, laughing to himself as he watched one read YOU are an EX-CONVICT, another YOU are an ALCOHOLIC,

a third YOU are an INFORMER, as he watched the others reading their cards. Philip smiled at his, Christine laughed at hers, Tom remained impassive, and Anthony flushed with excitement. Alice's smouldering face expressed astonishment, and Lee raised her dark eyebrows in cool amusement.

"Marvelous!" crowed Anthony.

"It's what I've always wanted to be," giggled Christine.

Alice tried to sneak a peek at Philip's card, but he caught her at it and pressed the card close to his chest.

"It says," he told her with mock sternness, " 'YOU are a SNOOP.' "

Tom began to crumple his card, but Clinton hastily stopped him. "No, don't throw it away!" he ordered. "You keep them until Saturday, and . . ." he aimed his next words at Christine, *"don't show them!"*

The men put the cards in their pockets; Lee and Alice placed them carefully in their handbags. Christine, still giggling, stuffed hers down the front of her lounging pajamas, tucking it between her large breasts.

"Anyone who wants to peek at mine gets a kiss," she invited, tossing her long hair coyly.

"What's the game?" asked Philip.

"The idea," explained Clinton importantly, "is to discover everybody's 'secret.' Without peeking, of course. And to prevent the other players from discovering yours."

"How do we do that?" enquired Lee.

"Every day we'll park in a different port where

you can find proof of one person's 'secret,'" answered Clinton with great seriousness. Games were his life-support system; the only terms he could function with, face life with, were winning and losing and scoring points. He was especially obsessed with scoring points. "I'll announce which 'secret' to look for, and I'll give you a clue which'll tell you where to go or what to do on shore. If you solve the clue properly, it'll lead you to the place where the 'proof' is."

"And if not," remarked Lee clearly, "a brisk keelhauling at six bells." She was dreading a week of Clinton's pompous posturings and savage put-downs. She had been born into and raised in a power struggle; they no longer interested her.

Tom hastily attempted to cover up his wife's remark. He smiled placatingly at Clinton and asked, "Supposing you announce, let's say, 'Pyromaniac' and, let's say, that's my secret. Why should I bother looking for the 'proof'?"

"Because when the person whose secret it is finds the 'proof,' I'll take it away and the game for that evening will be over."

"And the people who haven't found it don't score, right?" put in Philip.

"Right," agreed Clinton, smiling wickedly at Philip. "If you could direct as fast as you catch on to games, you'd never be a has-been again."

"What do we get if we win?" asked Alice, still pursuing the elusive prize.

"Better billing," snapped Clinton.

"Let's play!" cried Tom.

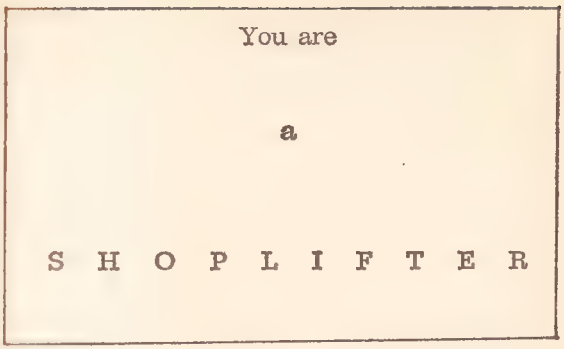
Clinton checked his watch again. "According to

the old pizza-slinger who runs this tub for me, we'll be dropping anchor around seven P.M. That's when you'll get your clues for the evening."

"And for whom are we looking tonight?" asked Philip.

Clinton looked around at all the faces. Every eye was on him. Enjoying the attention, he kept them in suspense a moment, then bared his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"The person with the Shoplifter card," he said.



CHAPTER III

They sat huddled on the narrow seats of the motor launch, staring at the shiny silver keys in their hands. The summer evening had not yet given way to night; in the dark pink and blue light of dusk they could make out the feathery palms and rocky cliffs of Villefranche, less than two miles from where the *Sheila* was anchored. Vittorio stood silent at the wheel, waiting for the signal to begin.

The launch bobbed in the chop; all six were uncomfortable and a bit chilly. Alice, clearly bored, stared out to sea. Lee scrutinized her key closely, while Philip and Tom thought deeply and Anthony and Christine pretended to be thinking deeply. Their keys were identical, all of silver, and each bearing the legend "Sterling 18K" stamped on the back. Finally, Christine broke the silence, unable to bear it longer.

"All right. Who's got the Shoplifter card?"

There was no reply. Annoyed, Christine continued. "Come on, we're not really gonna do this, are we? Run around this bombed-out backwater with a silver key up our ass?"

"Which probably means," commented Tom, "that you're the Shoplifter."

"Tee-hee," retorted Christine.

Lee still gazed at the key clutched in her hand. "Is this the only clue we get?" she asked.

"It must open a door somewhere," Anthony said slowly.

"Brilliant," applauded Alice with heavy sarcasm. She wore a tight-fitting silk pantsuit of bright green, with a cashmere sweater knotted over her shoulders. She looked spectacular, her red-brown hair flowing down her back, her sandaled foot tapping impatiently.

"It's only a game, Rabbit," implored Anthony. "I thought you were looking forward to it."

"It's dumb!" Alice snorted, tossing her head.

Christine leaned forward in the launch, smiling seductively at the wheelman. Her low-cut blouse showed off acres of cleavage; she wore a tight, wide leather belt around the waistband of her slacks and it pushed her large breasts up and made them surge into the opening of her shirt. "Vittorio, honey . . ." she wheedled coyly.

There was the sudden roaring sound of a powerful motor, and their launch began to rock with the swell. Clinton's own launch, with Guido at the wheel, zoomed up from the direction of the port and circled the guest launch. Standing in the bow, astride

a large tarpaulin bag, Clinton held an electric megaphone to his lips; his voice came booming at them over the water like the great thunder of Zeus.

"Stop finagling with Vittorio, Christine, he doesn't know what the key means any more than you do. It's *my* secret! Everybody solved it? Vittorio will pick you up again at ten sharp. Be on the dock by then, or you'll have to swim back to the boat through the oil slick and the beer cans. And no conferring! This is an individual competition. Stop pouting, Alice, you're having a *terrific* time!"

Having completed its circle, Clinton's launch roared off to Villefranche again. The sound of the engine grew fainter and fainter. As though this were the signal, Vittorio switched on the ignition and the other launch coughed and then blasted into life. With mixed emotions, they took off for port in the wake of Clinton's launch.

Christine giggled uncontrollably. "Kill," she said quietly.

The streets of Villefranche were growing darker as night began to close in on the Côte d'Azur, but a number of shops kept open late to take full advantage—in both meanings of the phrase—of the tourists who flock to the south of France every summer. Lee studied the sign above the shop door. *"Argent Ancien et Moderne,"* it read. She was heading quickly for the door when she turned at a familiar voice. It was Christine's, in the little baby tone she affected to show contrition. Lee winced.

"Don't hate me," Christine wheedled in a poor

imitation of cute. "I followed you. Look, I know it's against the rules, but let's knock this off together. I speak a little Frog . . ."

Lee didn't deign to reply. She opened the door of the silver shop and stepped inside with Christine at her heels.

Anthony pounded at the door of the locksmith's shop. There was no light at the window, but Anthony kept knocking until the sweat formed on his brow, and his fist—a huge, hard fist that had seen lots of use—began to ache. At long last, the door opened a crack, and an ancient nose poked through it. Above the nose was a rheumy eye that regarded Anthony with loathing.

"Fermé," the old man muttered, slamming and bolting the shop door with finality. Anthony cursed in frustration, then, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets, he started angrily up the street to the Croisette.

A man stepped out of the *pissoir* across from the locksmith and, smiling, watched Anthony as he stalked away. It was Tom. Next door to the shop stood a small, cheap transient hotel. Tom looked up at the unlit marquee: *Le Sterling.* His grin grew wider as he started across the street, key in hand.

The lobby of the Sterling was a sleazy place, badly lit, in need of painting, with cracked and peeling leather chairs and dusty potted plants the only furniture aside from floor-stand ashtrays. There was a newsstand at the back, but it was unattended. Philip stood at the registration desk, his silver key in

his hand, addressing the suspicious night clerk in his most polite and British tones.

"If you'll just permit me to compare . . ."

Tom, seeing Philip at the desk, ducked quickly up the stairs, unobserved.

Alice sat despondent at a small round table in the Café Villefranche, a little café in the Croisette. A beaded curtain behind her separated her café and table from the one next door to it. The café was almost deserted; a few tourists and a couple of inattentive waiters were her only company. She sat drinking and smoking, taking deep drags on her cigarette and staring idly at her key. At last, with an impatient gesture, she flicked the key across the table. She scowled, and lit another cigarette from the stub of the last one.

The silver-shop clerk examined the key closely, while Lee watched him. Christine, her mission forgotten, played hide-and-seek with the merchandise, picking up objects and putting them down again haphazardly.

"Look at this chintzy toast rack," she chirruped loudly, "or is it a letter-holder? Paul and Joanne would adore it! Ninety francs. Let's see, that's ninety divided by five . . ." She went on figuring the price in dollars, ignoring the clerk, who was now telling Lee his opinion.

"It looks like a hotel key," he said in French.

At the word "hotel," Lee's eyes widened. With a hurried *"Merci,"* she snatched the key back and almost ran out of the shop.

The tinkle of the shop bell brought Christine back to earth. She looked around wildly for Lee, then she, too, left the shop at top speed, crying "Wait!" as she pursued Lee Parkman down the street.

"Wait! What'd you find?" Christine yelled, running.

Anthony spotted the two women hurrying down the street; Christine appeared to be out of breath. He hastened to catch up with them, and he too asked Lee, "What'd you find?"

Christine drew close to him and whispered into his ear. "I'll give you a hint. 'Key' in French is *clef* . . . C—L—E—F. Get it?" Christine poked Anthony lightly and winked. "Don't tell Clinton I told you."

Smiling broadly, she watched Anthony disappear up the street, chasing a new false clue. She turned triumphantly back to Lee, but the street was empty. Lee had disappeared.

Christine shook her key in impatience and anger, calling after her. "Lee, *Lee*, LEE!" She stamped her foot in rage and shook her key again. A middle-aged couple passed her—tourists, the man in a wrinkled summer suit and straw hat, the woman in tight pants and a midriff blouse that exposed a roll of fat around her middle. They stared at Christine openly.

"I haven't seen *that* one around before," said the woman.

"Probably a war baby," her husband remarked.

Lee, out of sight of Christine, was looking up hotels in the phone directory chained to the telephone booth on the corner.

In the lobby of the Sterling Hotel, Philip had made progress, slow but secure. He was now behind the desk, matching his key against the ones in the rack. The night desk clerk, richer by twenty francs, stood by indifferently, picking his teeth with dental floss and idly watching the *fou anglais* sort through the keys. The tourist couple from the Croisette came in through the front door and made for the desk.

"Vingt-deux, s'il vous plaît," the husband asked Philip in a terrible Iowa accent.

As he handed him the key, the wife noticed the silver key in Philip's left hand. She tugged at her husband's sleeve and, in a mutter that carried loud and clear, she whispered, "I knew this hotel was an atcay ousehay. It's just like the one that whore had on the corner."

Philip straightened up, galvanized as if by a bolt of electricity. He leaned over the desk eagerly.

"Which corner, madam?"

Dumbfounded, the woman could only point silently in the direction of the Croisette. Husband and wife stood mystified as Philip rushed past them and out the hotel door into the night.

Tom could feel his heart pounding in his chest with excitement. He was good at games, very good, and he was on the scent now, getting very close to his objective. He could feel the nearness as he walked briskly down the dim and grimy hotel corridor, checking the numbers on the doors of the rooms. Twelve, fourteen, sixteen . . . he stopped in front of the one that should be right and looked up. The door had a large "K" stenciled after the number 18.

18K. The doorknob carried a "Do Not Disturb" sign. Tom looked at the key in his hand, then inserted it in the door and turned it.

As the door creaked open slowly, Tom heard the sound of gunfire. He froze in his tracks, but a familiar bluish light streaming onto the floor and the hollowness of the sound reassured him. He stepped into the dark room; the only light came from the corridor outside and the television set, which was showing a shoot-'em-up Western dubbed badly in French. The light from the television set made a pool of brightness, outlining the body of a man lying in his blood on the floor, with what appeared to be a meat cleaver protruding from his back.

Tom froze again, with a gasp of horror. After a second in which the only sound he heard was the pounding of his pulse, he took a tentative step into the room, and then another. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness of the light from the hallway, he could see that every one of the few pieces of furniture that sparsely decorated the dingy room was tagged. There were price tags on the pictures, the lamps, the mirror, on the open suitcase on the bed, on the jewelry that someone had flung down on the night table. The table itself was tagged—everything had a price tag on it.

Tom approached the body cautiously and knelt beside it. He peered at it closely in the half-light, at its glassy eye and plaster face. He smelled a familiar odor. Catsup. As he reached his hand out, the room door clicked shut, blotting out the hall light and leaving as the only source of light the beam from the TV. Tom rose to his feet and whirled around.

"Don't touch the dummy, dummy," Clinton's voice bit into the darkness. "Just figure out what happened and get your buns out of here before one of the other dodos comes in."

"Right," said Tom. He bent to examine the dummy again. It lay on its face; near one outstretched hand an open wallet prominently displayed a police badge—the *Sûreté*. The dummy's other hand clutched a price-tagged bottle of Chanel No. 5.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock," scoffed Clinton impatiently. Tom thought out loud.

"Well, obviously this is the Shoplifter's room. Everything still has a price tag on it."

"Yawn," said Clinton with elaborate disdain.

"And this is a detective whom he's killed . . ." mused Tom. "And the bottle of perfume is a clue to the Shoplifter's identity."

"Do you move your lips when you read?" Clinton's voice was frosted with sarcasm.

Ignoring him, Tom continued. "Perfume . . . scent . . . money . . . French money is francs, not scents . . . Chanel No. 5 . . . Ah!" Tom stood up. "Very good, Clinton, very good." He walked over to the television set and switched the indicator to Channel 5.

The screen showed a quickly moving montage of shots, a series of blurred photographs taken in and around Hollywood, at various parties and premieres, none of them very recent. Clinton's voice, using a phoney French accent, narrated the voice-over.

" 'Ere are several shots . . . all ze known photographs of ze brutal Shoplifter who has terrified ze sniveling merchants of ze Côte d'Azur for ze past twenty years. Here is ze only head shot, taken by

Bruno of Hollywood." Onto the screen came a closeup of the Shoplifter.

"Clinton, I'm dazzled," applauded Tom. "Closed circuit?"

"What did you think it was, black magic?" Clinton sneered. The film clip and the narration began again. As Clinton switched the channel selector over to the Western, a key turned in the lock and the door to the hall opened again. Clinton ducked behind the door, out of sight.

Lee stepped into the room. She smiled as she saw Tom, then uttered a muffled shriek as her eyes fell on the "body." She clutched at Tom's arm.

"Oh, my God, what's that?"

Tom patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't get your hopes up, darling. It's not our host, who's standing behind the door."

"Go play the pinball machines," Clinton said to Tom. "I'll see you at ten."

Tom kissed his wife on his way out. "Have fun," he said lightly, tapping her on the chin. Then he left, closing the door behind him and leaving Lee to find the solution.

Alice still sat alone at the little table in the outdoor café. As she saw Anthony approaching, she hastily reached over and retrieved her key, turning it in her hands with feigned interest.

"Hi! Did you get it?" asked Anthony, pulling up a chair.

"Not yet," his wife answered.

"I could give you a hint."

"Uh-uh. I want to figure it out myself."

Anthony's good-looking face creased into a worried frown. He leaned over the table and touched Alice's hand, taking it in his large one. He tried to look into her eyes, but she appeared to avoid his glance.

"Listen," he said worriedly, "you seem a little . . . Are you okay?"

Alice pulled her hand away with a shaky laugh. "Don't touch me, you shoplifter!"

As their eyes met, they both laughed. Then Anthony pushed his chair back with a clatter and stood up. Nodding his head, he hurried off, as Alice turned the key over and over in her hands, pretending to study it as her perfect teeth chewed anxiously on her blood-red lower lip.

Philip studied his likeness on the small screen. It was not a flattering one, but he chuckled as the droning narration described him as "ze brutal Shoplifter."

"Well," he said to Clinton, "I've found the 'proof.' What now?"

Clinton switched the set off. "We get out of here," he said. "That catsup was beginning to attract silverfish."

As he followed Philip out of the hotel room, Clinton turned the "Do Not Disturb" sign around on the doorknob. It now read "The Game Is Over."

As Anthony hurried out of the Treble Clef bar, he saw Christine passing up the street, still clutching her key in her hand. She pretended to cringe, shrinking away from him.

"Don't hit me!" she begged in her little-girl voice.

Anthony kept his face straight. Jerking his head back at the bar behind him, he said solemnly to Christine, "Thank God you know French. Did you get fixed up with any of the go-go boys?"

Christine looked at him, stunned. Go-go boys!?!

"And I've spent the last hour ditching guys who thought I was offering them the key to my hotel room!" she moaned.

Anthony blinked in realization at the words "hotel room" just as Christine disappeared hungrily into the bar.

The Treble Clef was badly lighted, and it was a minute before Christine's eyes adjusted to the dimness. She stood in the doorway, dressed in a low-cut blouse and a tight, short skirt, while twenty-five pairs of eyes stripped her naked and devoured her. Christine gasped as she met the passionate gaze of more than two dozen lesbians, most of them dressed in leather and skin-tight jeans. Her lower jaw dropped, then her tongue came out and licked feebly at her lips. Twenty-five faces broke into welcoming smiles. She had made a serious tactical error. With a low moan of horror, Christine turned and ran stumbling out of the bar.

Anthony scowled in exasperation at the sign on the doorknob. "The Game Is Over."

"Balls," he spat.

Alice signaled to a passing waiter for another drink. Behind her, the beaded curtain rattled and

she turned in surprise. A faint smile touched her lips, but her brows knitted anxiously.

"Not *here*, for Pete's sake. Everybody's walking around." She held out her hand and smiled again as it was taken and caressed.

"Listen," Alice continued, "I want to see you and I've got to talk to you. It's about this game. I know what I said about being careful, but nobody'll be up on the top deck tonight. I mean late . . ." She broke off, pulling her hand back, as she saw Anthony moving up the street toward the café, furious. His shoulders were hunched, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, in a familiar rage.

"Hi, Bunny!" she said, too brightly, as Anthony reached her table.

The launch's engine throbbed in readiness; Vittorio stood at the wheel in the stern of the boat. The night air was cold now, and Lee was glad of the soft wool jacket around her shoulders. She looked at Tom, Philip, and Christine, who sat impatiently in the bow, waiting for the others.

". . . You mean there's no such *thing* as 18-karat silver?" whimpered Christine.

"Gold, my dear, only gold," answered Philip tolerantly. "And, if I'd thought more clearly, I wouldn't have wasted fifteen minutes in some masseuse's apartment while she showed me her scrapbooks from World War Two."

Tom winced, and Lee leaned forward, her lovely face a mask of concern.

"What is it, Tom, your back?"

Her husband nodded, grimacing in pain, his

fingers feeling gingerly for the tender small of his back. "All that running around . . ."

They looked up at the clatter of heels along the quay. Alice and Anthony appeared hand in hand. Anthony jumped easily into the launch, then turned and lifted Alice down lightly.

"All right, who solved it? How many?" he demanded.

"Didn't *you?*" cooed Christine with false sweetness.

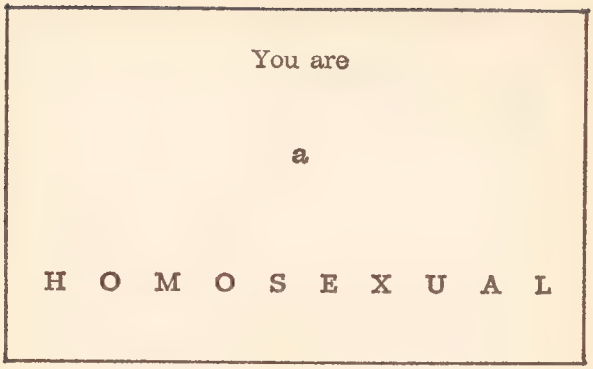
"No talking about the game," commanded Tom.

Vittorio freed the stern lines and began to push the launch away from the landing; it rocked in the choppy swell.

Alice shrugged prettily at the others, making a little face of apology. "I'll be more into it tomorrow night . . ." she promised.

Christine's voice held a note of iron. "You'd better be, honey," she threatened, "or Candy Bergen will be playing Sheila."

The roar of the motor drowned out Alice's reply as the boat sped off into the darkness in the direction of the yacht and Clinton.



CHAPTER IV

By bedtime the excitement of the first game had worn off, leaving everyone with a feeling of let-down and exhausted ennui. After a late dinner of veal piccata and endive salad, the company had abandoned desultory small talk and headed for their respective staterooms or, in the case of the Parkmans, cabins.

Lee, in beige pongee pajamas, sat leafing through an old yachting magazine, absorbing nothing of its contents, but content to just sit. The doors of the small bathroom ("Shouldn't we be calling it the head?" Lee wondered) that connected her little room with her husband's were partly ajar, and Lee could see Tom propped up against his headboard, absorbed in a paperback mystery. Suddenly, the door of the stateroom next to Lee's banged open,

and a torrent of acid-rock music filled both tiny cabins.

"Wonderful," Lee sighed grimly.

"Go tell them to turn it down," Tom called in.

"Are you mad? I'm not playing housemother to those two!"

As suddenly as it had opened, the door was heard to bang shut, diminishing the volume of the music to a tolerable level. Tom, wearing blue Sea Island Cotton pajamas piped in darker blue, his black hair tousled attractively, came through the connecting doors and perched on the edge of Lee's narrow bunk.

"Alone at last," he smiled.

"Not while Clinton's al—" Lee broke off with a small gasp of horror. "Oh, God, I meant to say 'not while Clinton's on board' but it came out 'not while Clinton's alive . . .' " She looked at her husband with a rueful, apologetic smile.

"You don't forgive easy." Tom kept his tone casual.

Lee shrugged. The pain of memory was in her voice. "I've lived around Clintons all my life. Starting with Daddy. That same hearty way of bringing people to their knees and then handing out little presents."

"Like this job," Tom said dully.

The sound of raised voices nearby interrupted them. Both pricked up their ears to listen. The words couldn't be distinguished, but the voices were unmistakably Alice's and Clinton's.

"She wants a bigger bed," joked Lee.

"Point noted," laughed Tom.

Lee eyed her husband affectionately, enjoying the lustrous blackness of the curl that had escaped onto his forehead, the deep brown of his eyes, set wide apart under thick, jet brows. She admired the boyish curve of his cheek and the bold shape of his masculine nose, his strong neck. Her eyes dropped to his body, and a secret smile touched the curved corners of her generous mouth. She patted the bunk beside her with one slim hand.

"Come on over here," Lee invited softly. "Let's forget about Clinton for a while."

As her husband moved closer, Lee snapped off the lamp. The small cabin was illuminated faintly by only a bluish light streaming in through the porthole as though bearing messages from distant galaxies.

". . . 'And starlight filled the corners of the room,' " she murmured as his lips sought her throat and his hands were busy with her pajama buttons.

"You're an incurable romantic," he whispered against her small breasts.

"It's curable," Lee smiled, reaching for Tom.

"I swear to God I didn't!" Clinton shouted clearly a couple of cabins away. "What can I tell you?" A door slammed hard in angry reply.

Tom raised his head from his wife's nakedness. "What's that all about?" he asked in a tone of real curiosity.

Lee raised herself to one elbow, dropping her pajamas on the floor. "Hey, turn off your questing mind," she protested, laughing.

"Gotcha," her husband agreed.

"Gotcha . . . mmmm . . ." purred Lee as Tom returned to her arms. As his warm lips and rough cheeks traveled over her body, she felt the familiar weakness that she lived for. She arched her slim hips and belly upwards for his lovemaking, urging him on with her hands and her eager mouth. Their locked bodies gleamed in the cabin's dimness like the writhing figures of homeless ghosts.

The sundeck of the *Sheila* should have been deserted at this hour of the night. As hot as it was during the day, it was equally cool now, and Alice and her companion were grateful for their sweaters and for the plaid blankets they'd found on the deck chairs.

They lay side by side, sharing a joint. Alice was nicely high, for she had been toking deeply, her astonishing breasts straining with the effort to keep the smoke way down in her lungs for as long as possible. The marijuana had made her more voluble than usual, and had stripped away most of the veneer that the elocution lessons Anthony had forced on her gave her voice. She spoke plainly, in Midwestern accents; her natural voice was a trifle nasal and flat, yet there was urgency in her words.

"I was out of work. They'd gone through a shuffle at the model agency, and I was broke. Jean wasn't keeping me any more . . . and it was in Best's. I just suddenly got this urge to take something, *anything*. I told myself it was 'cause I was broke, but really it was this urge." She broke off as the joint was passed back to her, and smiled her thanks. Then her voice

dropped a notch. "So I ripped off a leopard coat. Big brown buttons and slash pockets. Poor thing."

She tucked her hands behind her head and stared up at the Mediterranean sky, ablaze with so many stars it could have passed for a Van Gogh original.

"But of course I was caught," she continued. " 'Will you please accompany me to the manager's office?' " She did an accurate imitation of a stern and indignant store official.

Dragging on the joint again, she looked slyly at her companion, slitting her wonderful eyes. "And do you know who got me out of it? No, scratch that. I don't want you to be jealous." She smiled reminiscently. "We know how jealous *you* get."

Handing back the joint, she dropped her hands in her lap and studied them in the cold moonlight. "Anyway," she continued, "I got bailed out and nobody knew. But nobody knew me then. That's why I was so out of it tonight, but Clinton *swore* to me it was just a coincidence." She gave a snort of disbelief through her fine, narrow nostrils. "Then I suddenly realized: it's not just *me!*"

Alice sat up straight and fished in her pocket for her typewritten card. She brought it out and showed it to her companion. It read: YOU are a HOMOSEXUAL.

She shrugged affectionately, an exquisite movement that shook the tumbled hair on her slender, but broad, shoulders. "See, darling," she explained, "I thought of you and I thought: *Clinton's got something going for each of us.* He's just mixed up the

cards." Alice took the joint back and smoked reflectively as she put the card away again.

Suddenly, she broke into giggles, nearly choking on the sweet smoke. "It's rotten, but I'd like to know what the others are. What's he got for Anthony? I mean, that's the thing about secrets: we all know stuff about each other, we just don't know the same stuff. How did he find out? Sheila, probably . . ."

Her face shone pale in the moonlight as she turned to her companion. "Did you get the Shoplifter card? That'd be ironic . . . You won't tell?" she begged prettily. "What does *your* card say?" She raised herself to a sitting position with one swift and graceful movement, listening to the darkness. "Someone's . . ." Then she relaxed. "No," she said, satisfied they were alone.

She stretched like a cat, enjoying the gentle stabilized motion of the moving yacht, the beauty of the night, and the warm, languorous feeling that bathed her luscious body whenever she was high. She was but definitely turned on. Her lips parted in a smile, revealing perfect white teeth, gleaming in the darkness like those of a predatory animal.

Alice turned toward her companion, supporting her weight lazily on one elbow. "How are you going to get through this trip without jumping on my bones and eating me alive, hmmm?" She laughed, a husky sound quivering with sexual vibrations. "But when we get back . . ." she promised, showing the merest tip of her pink, curled tongue. She shut her eyes and shuddered with pleasure, carried away by her imagination. "Jesus," she moaned.

Then she turned her incredible body toward the other deck chair again, holding her long arms out for an embrace. "What *does* your card say?" she asked again, just before their lips met.

Anthony was stoned out of his gourd and flying. The heavy sounds of T. Rex poured over him in waves, washing his head clean of almost everything else. As the music penetrated both ears through the foam rubber earphones plugged into the cassette player, Anthony gave a passing thought, just a vagrant wisp of a partial thought, to the remarkable resemblance between Marc Bolan and Alice. If Alice would just spray glitter on her eyelids, and if Marc only had tits . . .

He lay on his back in the huge brocaded bed that was strewn with stuffed animals, his head propped on all the pillows. On both hands he wore hand puppets, grotesque playthings that gave his large hands the eerie semblance of lives of their own, as though there were really three creatures in the stateroom. Waving his hands, Anthony made the puppets conduct the unheard music.

Alice came in quietly and began undressing without a word. She paid no attention to her husband, who watched her through slitted eyes. He held the puppets up to his face and, in a macabre pair of squeaky voices, held a dialogue between them.

"Is she still upset?" croaked the right hand.

"She doesn't look upset any more," put in the left hand.

"She's got nice knockers," leered the first puppet.

"Please don't," said Alice softly and without emotion.

The second puppet folded itself over the first one with a warning squeak. "She's looking upset again."

"I guess she doesn't like games, she always loses," chortled Anthony's right hand in a voice close to Anthony's own.

"Talk about her knockers," the second doll advised.

Alice exploded, hurling her dressing gown away from her in rage. "Oh, for Christ's sake, you leech," she shouted. "Why don't you go down the hall and get yourself a job!"

Anthony covered his eyes with both puppets. "Oh, boo-hoo, boo-hoo, boo-hoo," he sobbed, turning away.

Alice stood stricken, immediately contrite. She ran to Anthony and attempted to embrace him. Her sobs joined with his.

"Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, boo-hoo-hoo . . ."

In his luxuriously appointed cabin Clinton lay at his ease, his long thin body in its Moorish caftan stretched out on his double bed. Indirect strip lighting cast warm golden shadows on the mahogany-paneled walls of the stateroom and made the thick pile of the carpet appear even deeper. On the ebony campaign chest that served him as a night table, a convoluted glass carburetor pipe stood filled and ready, the best Lebanese Red. A few poppers—ampoules of amyl nitrite—lay scattered in front of

the hash pipe. At the back of the table stood a small loudspeaker, and from it, strange, guttural sounds were issuing.

"Boo-hoo-hoo," in Anthony's puppet voice.

"Jesus!" sniffed Clinton in disgust. He put down the magazine he was leafing through, a four-color job filled with beaver shots of long-legged girls in garter belts and lacy stockings, and reached for the knob on the loudspeaker, turning it to another position. He listened for a moment. Nothing. He turned it again. Nothing. Nobody home. Turning the set off with a grunt, he picked the magazine up again in bored irritation.

The door clicked open. Clinton looked up, and his upper lip drew back from his large teeth in a wolfish, plastic grin. Christine stood in the doorway. She wore a see-through mini-nightgown and a sailor hat cocked jauntily on her head. Clinton could see her large red nipples and the dark brown fur that contrasted with the streaked golden mop on her head. She looked like a pornographic picture titled Follow the Fleet.

Spotting the girlie magazine in Clinton's hands, Christine gave a mock pout. "You started without me," she chided, making her way to the bed.

The lounge was dark except for the small light that was always kept on over the bar, creating a small oasis and watering-hole in the huge desert of the room. The scoreboard was still propped on the easel, only now it read:

	Philip	Christine	Tom	Lee	Alice	Anthony
Mon.	X	O	X	X	O	O
Tues.						
Wed.						
Thurs.						
Fri.						
Sat.						

In the dim light of the bar, Philip mixed himself a brandy and soda, chipping away with the ice pick at the block of ice in the bucket. Tasting his drink, he splashed in a spot more soda and, satisfied, stepped out of the lounge onto the deck.

Philip followed up the small red glow of a cigarette tip that pierced the darkness and found Lee huddled by herself in a deck chair, smoking and sipping reflectively at the tall glass in her hand. Pulling up another chair, Philip asked, "Lee, my darling, what are you doing out here at this ungodly hour?"

It took Lee nearly a minute to answer and, when she finally did, it was on a topic that took Philip completely by surprise.

"Listen," she said earnestly, gazing off to sea, "have I ever told you how sweet you were to me when I was a child?"

Philip closed his eyes, remembering. He saw the huge and costly house in Santa Barbara, heard the voices around the pool, the men's voices loud and rude and talking only of deals, deals and money. He could almost smell the heavy blue smoke of their

large Montecristo cigars, imported from Batista's corrupt Havana. More faintly, he could hear the anxious chatter of the women, filling the time with inconsequential talk of hairdressers and masseuses and dress designers, as the women kept their ears cocked toward the men, awaiting commands.

And there had been a child, a skinny dark little girl with huge brown eyes too large for her frightened face. A little girl of quick intelligence and long, slender, womanly legs. A sensitive little girl who read, and loved music, and knew that she was a pawn in a much larger struggle . . . Philip opened his eyes, and looked at Lee fondly.

"Nothing could have been easier," he said gently.

"No, I mean it. At Daddy's legendary Sunday lunches."

"I can still see you on Olivia de Havilland's lap," he said, smiling.

"Funny, she was one of the few people Sheila ever had anything good to say about."

Philip found it difficult to follow Lee's shifting mood. "Couldn't you sleep?" he asked.

"Yes, if I took a pill, which I'd rather not do just yet. Lord, I hope Clinton really intends to make this movie. Tom hasn't done anything but rewrite jobs for so long. And need I tell you that the two years we've tried living off Clinton's options on 'Freakshow' . . ."

" . . . Hardly paid for your pool maintenance?" Philip supplied. They exchanged warm, quiet smiles, the smiles of old friends who had known each other through good times and bad.

"If a glass of second-rate brandy at this hour might excuse a certain tactlessness, why don't you simply dip into capital and produce a picture yourself?" Philip asked. "Private financing isn't that uncommon today."

Tom, dressed in pajamas and bathrobe, stood tensely silent at the bar, ice pick in hand, his ears straining for Lee's answer.

"And can you imagine how Tom would feel?"

He stepped out onto the deck, calling out to Lee and Philip in an uncanny imitation of Clinton's sardonic voice.

"Well, hi-ho, gang, going over your hand signals for the bridge tournament?" Then, in his normal voice, he said quietly to both, "How I'd feel about what?"

"If we suddenly discovered," said Philip a bit too loudly, "that we've all been killed in a terrible crash and we're on our way to the Great Beyond . . ."

"With Clinton as God?" grinned Tom. "Give me a sip of that," he said to Lee.

"It's bourbon."

Philip rose and slipped his hands into the pockets of his rather worn blazer. "Well, I'm told that calisthenics are at eight sharp," he quipped. "We don't want to incur disfavor at this point, do we? Good night." He turned and made his way through the deck chairs into the salon, his shoulders still straight despite the weight of his fifty-five years. Lee and Tom watched him go.

"Nice man," said Lee with fondness.

Tom put his hand out to his wife. "Come on back down," he said.

Lee stood. "I've only had one," she said, a defensive note entering her low voice.

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get some sleep."

"I'd kill myself for a hot bath, but Clinton has the only tub," sighed Lee, running her hand through her thick hair. She clasped her husband's proffered hand in hers, and they went below.

As Lee slipped back into her pongee pajamas, Tom rummaged through the minuscule medicine cabinet in the pocket-sized john.

"You want one of these?" He held out the bottle of sleeping capsules.

She joined him in the bathroom, shaking a single capsule out of the bottle and running a glass of water from the tap. Tossing her head back, she swallowed the capsule and smiled at her husband. "Well," she said, with a lift of one dark brow, "I may not really need it, mister."

Tom stepped forward and embraced her passionately, hugging her slim body tightly and burying his face in her neck. Lee sensed something other than the physical in his embrace, a preoccupation with something that she didn't understand. When they broke apart, she looked at him earnestly and affectionately, trying to read his mood from the expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Tom shook his head in puzzlement. "There's something going on," he said slowly. "I'm getting strange vibes." He pushed Lee away gently. "I'm just going to have a quick talk with Clinton."

"At this hour?"

"He never sleeps. Like Dracula. The last time he slept soundly was the night Sheila was killed."

Lee's brows knitted in distress. "You think we'll ever hear the last of Sheila? Oh, Tommy, let's just get this movie made, put the money in Mutual Bonds, and go home." She turned and entered her own cabin.

Tom walked with determination down the corridor leading from his stateroom to Clinton's. He paused outside. No light showed under the door. From inside the room Tom could hear muffled giggles and what sounded to him incredibly like stifled meowing. He grimaced, annoyed. Clinton and Christine. As he started back, he saw Philip smiling satirically at him from the doorway of his own stateroom. The older man was clad in a dressing gown and held a pair of shoes in his hand, about to put them out for cleaning. Tom shrugged, jerking his head in the direction of Clinton's cabin.

"Go to sleep," advised Philip. "They'll give us conflicting reports about it in the morning."

You are

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E X - C O N V I C T

CHAPTER V

The second morning of the incredible voyage blessed them like a perfect day in June, which it was. During the night, the yacht had cruised southward, hugging the curving Riviera coastline from Villefranche around the tiny cape of Antibes and Juan-les-Pins. Now, the *Sheila*'s anchor was being dropped in the sapphire-blue waters off the Iles des Lérins. The mistral, which had threatened earlier this morning, had not after all disturbed their day with its treacherous seventy-five-mile-an-hour winds, and the Med was like glass. The charm of the Côte d'Azur, with its fronded palm trees, dazzling white and pink stucco villas and red tile roofs, was making itself felt by everyone aboard.

Her depression banished by the beauty of the morning, Alice lay sunning herself on the topmost rear deck with Lee and Christine, as they worked to

deepen their Hollywood tans. Her chin on her folded arms, she watched through enormous sunglasses as Anthony set up a series of golf balls for Clinton to drive into the sea. Alice strained to hear their words, but the breeze kept snatching them away.

". . . of managing Alice's career," she heard Anthony saying.

"Uh-huh," Clinton grunted as he swung the club in a perfect arc. He did not look at Anthony.

"I mean," Anthony was explaining very earnestly, "we do think of *her* career as *our* career sort of thing. Still, my aspirations run closer to the production end, if you know what I mean."

"Uh-huh." Clinton kept his eye on the ball's trajectory until it disappeared into the water.

"Promotion, casting . . ." Anthony went on.

"Uh-huh."

"What," persisted Anthony, "and please be absolutely candid, would you say to me asking you for an associate producership on the upcoming film?" He waited, holding his breath until his stomach muscles ached like cramp.

Clinton turned to Anthony with a dazzling smile. "I'd say . . ." He broke off, unable to keep a straight face. He giggled uncontrollably and took a vicious whack at the last ball, driving it low and curved. "I'd say, 'Boo-hoo. Boo-hoo.' "

His smile broader than ever, Clinton handed the club to Anthony without a further word and disappeared down the gangway.

Alice sat up, her cheeks flushed with rage and humiliation, and reached for the bottle of Bain du Soleil. She poured a generous amount into the palms

of her hands and began smoothing it on her arms, trying to regain her composure.

Out of the corner of her mouth, but in a voice loud enough to ensure that Alice heard, Christine muttered to Lee, "Nothing worse than a hustler with bad timing."

Christine was not in the best of moods this morning. Lying on a vinyl mat between Lee and Alice, she felt gross and coarse. Lee's slenderness showed to advantage in the simple black maillot she wore, and the spectacular Alice in a bikini was a sight that no woman over the age of twenty should be expected to bear so early in the day. Christine's own ample body overflowed her one-size-too-small bikini, and she felt like a cow.

Alice sensed this with the antennae that women come equipped with, for she extended the suntan lotion to Christine. Stretching her gorgeous legs, with their incredibly long slender thighs and rounded calves, she turned her perfect back to Christine.

"Chrissy, put a little of this on my back, will you?" she purred sweetly.

"I'd love to," Christine replied with a sweetness equally false, "but I have to do twenty-five minutes on my front today."

"To make up for the twenty-five minutes on your back last night?" Alice sunk the knife in well, twisted the handle.

In her loudest and coarsest tones, Christine yelled over to the stricken Anthony, who still stood on the spot where Clinton had left him, clutching the golf club helplessly.

"Honey, do me a favor and put some guck on her

back, willya?" Christine bawled. "We don't want her to burn!" Then she turned her back on Alice, as the latter got furiously to her feet and stalked away, and addressed her comments to Lee.

"As I was saying, they shoot you full of rhino trancs, wrap you in hot sheets, and you wake up five days later thirty pounds thinner and screaming for hot turkey sandwiches." She peered closely at Lee, who seemed absorbed elsewhere. "Are you listening, or what?" Christine demanded.

"Half," Lee replied absently. She was gazing off at Clinton, who had returned to the deck with several thousand dollars' worth of scuba gear, which he'd dumped by the swimming stairs that led from the deck to the sea. Christine followed Lee's gaze and frowned, her eyes narrowing sharply.

"I'm here because I've got a client to keep and one to catch," she told Lee. "What's your excuse?"

Lee turned back to Christine with a slight shrug. "I've got a husband to hold on to. Who's trying to hold on," she replied quietly.

"With *your* money?" Christine scoffed.

Alice walked down from the sundeck to the next level below, where Clinton was climbing into his diving suit and adjusting the rest of his scuba gear. She sat on the steps, watching him in silence for a moment. Then she smiled.

"I like you best alone."

"People have been saying that to me for years," Clinton rejoined.

"You know in magazine cartoons when the guy

on the street corner winds up his little mechanical men and they walk crazily around?"

The image seemed to amuse Clinton. He reached over and pretended to wind up a giant key in Alice's back. "I'm that guy," he chortled.

"Oh, Clinton!" Alice's face was even more beautiful in sweet sorrow.

"Oh, Clinton what?" He adjusted his scuba mask and picked up his spear.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Sorry what?" His flappers were on the swimming stairs.

"Sorry that Anthony didn't handle that better," she said with charming candor.

Just before Clinton's head disappeared under the glassy water, he had the last word. "Cut and print."

Alice's nostrils flared in rage, and the corners of her mouth went white. She stood up carefully, and skinned her eyes around to see if anybody had heard this exchange. Forcing her lips into a brilliant smile, she walked away slowly, but she couldn't keep her hands from clenching into fists of frustration.

"Yoo-hoo, Vit-to-ri-o!"

Anthony leaned over the port rail and surveyed Christine, who floated happily on an inflatable raft near the stern.

"The crew's having their naps, Christine," he called down.

"Jesus! Watts, Pakistan, and now naps for sailors. Drop me down a Tab, willya? My tongue feels like a

Turkish parade ground." Christine raised her head and gave Anthony the benefit of her eyelashes. Anthony nodded and set off for the bar.

Tom was stretched out on one of the lounge's large couches. A script for rewrite was spread around him, and he was doodling on a scratch pad. He didn't look up as Anthony entered.

Anthony chuckled as he took a canned soda out of the little fridge in the bar. "Christine says her tongue feels like a Turkish parade ground," he reported, passing Guido coming in with a tray of glasses.

"Right," said Tom absently, lost in thought.

"Hey, Tommy, come on in," yelled Clinton from the starboard side. He was swimming around in full scuba gear, diving down for long minutes and coming to the surface to sport like a sardonic millionaire dolphin. "Tell us all about those rewrites you did on 'A Fistful of Lasagna' or whatever it was. You never talk about your work, why is that?" He didn't wait for an answer but, laughing evilly, dived again.

Philip hung his freshly washed cashmere socks over his open porthole. His cabin was on the starboard side, and he looked out to see Clinton surfacing again.

"Philip, listen!" called Clinton. "I've been mulling over the opening sequence. We zoom in close on a sleeping bag somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, Sheila's mother in labor. Think it'll play?" He gave a

hideous cackle, and dived down toward the stern, out of Philip's sight.

Alice lay in the center of her huge bed, eyes staring at the ceiling. Music blasted at her from the twin speakers wedged into the pillows behind her head, but even the Stones couldn't drown out the sound of Clinton's horrible mirth. He was in fine form today; he must have something really bizarre planned for tonight, she thought wearily.

"Hello? Are you there?" Clinton called, waiting for Philip's answer. Lee poked her dark head over the starboard rail.

"Uh, sorry, Clinton. I didn't get that. Shall we play what?"

"Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," grumbled Clinton in disgust, paddling away with a flip of his frog feet.

The *Sheila* rode steadily at anchor in the bright midday sun. A post-prandial peace had descended; the captain lay dozing in his bunk, the door to his cabin ajar. Later he would say that he hadn't seen anybody pass. The great engines, twin Mercedes Benz twelve-cylinder diesel beauties, were stilled. The generators hummed silently, air-conditioning and lighting the ship. The huge propellers gleamed in the sun, their razor-sharp blades at rest. The crew slept. Except for one person, one shadowy figure moving silently belowdecks, there seemed no life on board.

Christine paddled aimlessly around on the raft,

letting it drift toward the hull of the *Sheila.* She was, for Christine, almost happy. For the first time in a long time she felt at peace, without the tearing, grinding pressures of the competitive life she'd chosen for herself and was so determined to succeed at. There was no sound. Above her, the sun soaked into her bones, warming her flesh and bringing drowsy contentment in its rays. As long as she could stay on this rubber float, she thought, away from the others and their Hollywood bitchiness, she could be at rest. She hummed to herself, thinking with satisfaction of a world without Alices to make her feel ugly, without Lees to make her feel coarse, without Clintons to put her down with savage delight. She took a sip of her soda and hummed to herself. She felt like a little girl in her mother's bathtub. If only she had a celluloid duckie . . .

Christine's float drifted slowly astern. She shut her eyes because the strong sunlight glancing off the bright propellers hurt her eyelids.

The only person moving in the ship had reached the engine room. The switches were plainly marked, and it wasn't hard to find the right one.

Abruptly, the engines started. As the propellers tore into the calmness of the waters, the great yacht shuddered into life. Christine screamed as she felt herself sucked into the deadly maelstrom. She kicked wildly and tumbled into the water, disappearing instantly below the surface near the treacherous propellers that were now mangling the rubber raft to ribbons. She rose to the surface, dangerously near. Kicking and thrashing her arms and legs wildly, she continued to scream hysterically.

In the lounge, Tom and Guido looked up, startled, by both the screaming and the sudden movement of the ship. In his cabin, the portly Italian captain picked himself up from the floor, swearing loudly in his native language. He wrenched open his stateroom door and, with his suspenders still trailing around his hips, made for the engine room on the double.

Without hesitation, Anthony pulled himself up on the port rail and dived over, cutting the water neatly close to where Christine struggled in terror. The ship rocked again slightly as the captain reached the engine room and turned off the switch. The propellers came to a stop.

In less than a minute, Anthony had Christine safely to the ladder. He pushed her up ahead of him as Tom bent down to help hoist her aboard. Almost in shock, Christine was coughing and spitting water, laughing, crying, and gasping hysterically, all at the same time. Her body sagged in the small bathing suit; her arms and shoulders were covered with gooseflesh. Her long, heavy mop of hair was plastered to her back and shoulders, streaming water, and tendrils of it curled away from her face like seaweed, water-darkened.

"I'm all right! I'm all right!" she shrilled, jumping up and down on rubbery legs. "I feel so loved and cared for I want movies of this."

She caught a glimpse of reflection in a porthole and shrieked, pointing, "Look! Look! A new hairstyle!"

Clinton swam into view, raising his scuba mask, and Christine shrank away from Tom's supporting

arms. "Don't hit me," she pleaded. "I'm not hysterical yet! Just give me a glass of water and a couple of lesbians."

Christine sank to the deck, caught in the grip of hysteria. "I mean *libriums!*" she screamed between laughs and sobs. "Oh, God! Did you hear that? A couple of lesbians?" She waved her arms helplessly. "Don't hit me. I'm going to sober up *so* fast!"

By now, Lee, Alice, and Philip had joined the others at the rail. They looked on, bewildered and horrified. Lee reached down to help Christine, but the other pushed past her as she staggered to her feet, still babbling without a second's pause.

"Dibs on this story when we get back to Hollywood. This'll bring Louella out of . . . uh . . . what's its name? . . . You know? When you don't work any more? What's that word? What's the matter with you people? I think I'll have a little nap. Wake me when the credits are over. God, I feel so loved!"

Christine staggered past the stunned and silent onlookers into the lounge, shutting the door behind her. From behind the door, the sound of loud, tearing sobs reached them, and the guests looked at each other helplessly as Clinton came up the ladder and shoved past them. He faced them grimly.

"Is she okay?" he demanded.

Not one of them could tell him the answer.

Later, when they had pieced together what must have happened, but not why, they stood in the bar as a terrified Vittorio and a subdued Guido served them drinks. They could hear Clinton's furious voice, carrying even from the bridge, as he chewed

out the captain royally, in his dreaded sarcastic manner.

"Listen, Gummo, you've got some explaining to do. Don't you know you're not to turn on those egg-beaters while we're ditzing around out there? This is a goddamn luxury cruise, not an obstacle course!"

"Accidente, accidente," the captain pleaded, waving his arms. His heavy chins were covered with the sweat of fear, and his jowls trembled.

Clinton snarled. "Now shape up your crew, and I want a fifteen-page written report on this by nightfall! Get on it!" He turned and stalked out of the wheelhouse and off the bridge, leaving the hapless and uncomprehending captain to stare after him pitiously.

Their stunned silence lasted through lunch. When Tom stepped onto the dining deck, gingerly holding his back and wincing with every step he took, all the others except Christine were sitting around the table, picking at vitello tonnato without a word. Only Clinton appeared to be his usual extroverted self.

"When I was a kid," he waved his fork at Tom, "if you were late for meals you had to spend the next Sunday afternoon polishing all the napkin rings. But I suppose you do get points off for being a writer, old sock. How is she? In ten words or less."

"Recovering."

"Well, sit down. Cook seems to have sent up this rather thick soup *before* . . ." (he consulted a small printed card) *"before* the chestnut soufflé."

The hovering Vittorio bent forward and whispered a discreet word in Clinton's ear. "Oh, sorry,

that *was* the chestnut soufflé. Very good. Very good." He grinned brightly and mirthlessly at his guests. There was no reaction from any of them.

"My, aren't we all strangely subdued today," he said with pointed brittleness, looking around the table with an evil glint in his eye.

After a brief pause, Alice roused herself. "I've never slept on a boat before," she remarked in a dull voice.

Clinton brightened at the non sequitur. "Really? Well, that's a good game. Do you all know that game? Sure you do. 'I Have Never.'" He pointed his fork sharply at each of them in turn. "Ever sleep on a boat before?" Tom nodded. "Ever sleep on a boat before?" So did Lee. "Ever sleep on a boat before?" Anthony signaled yes. "Ever sleep on a boat before?" Philip nodded.

"And me," Clinton finished, "I have, so that's five, darling." He bared his teeth at Alice. "Clean sweep. Five points, one round for you. Tom?"

Tom didn't bother to think of anything clever. "I've never been seasick," he said without emphasis.

"Right," crowed Clinton. "Literally sick from the sea. Carsick is another ordeal. Okay." He stabbed the air sharply with his fork again, pointing around the table swiftly, barely giving the players a chance to answer. "Ever been seasick? Ever been seasick? Ever been seasick? Ever been seasick?" Philip and Alice had, and Lee and Anthony said they had not.

"And me, I have, so that's three points for Tom and one point for you and you. Lee?"

Lee looked up and met Clinton's eyes. "I have never been so bored," she said clearly.

"Right." Clinton refused to rise to the bait. "Ever been so bored?" he demanded. "Ever been so bored? Ever been so bored? Ever been so bored?" He raised his brows in mock surprise at the silence that greeted him. "Let's see some hands! Ever been so bored? Ever been so bored? And me, I'm having the fucking time of my life!"

Later, when the sun had long since crossed mid-heaven and the day itself was drawing to a close, Clinton began to get ready for the night's game. He stood supervising the loading of a large tarpaulin bag into his personal motor launch. Tom and Philip stood on the topmost forward deck watching the crew ready the launch. Tom smoked a cigarette to take his mind off the pain in his back, and he stood awkwardly, to favor it, his movements exaggeratedly slow. He spoke to Philip in an undertone.

"Look, I've been asking around, and none of us was in sight of any of the others for just those few seconds."

"According to the rules of the genre," Philip replied with a slight wry smile, "we should be looking for a motive."

"Even Clinton could have climbed up the other ladder . . ." Tom was saying, just as Clinton stepped out of the launch in front of them, as though he had heard his name.

"Haven't been pawing through that bag of tricks, have you, Dad?" he accused Philip playfully, indicating the tarpaulin sack.

Tom winced, cursing under his breath.

"Trying to get my attention?" laughed Clinton.

"It's my back," Tom explained apologetically.

"What month of the year *don't* you slip a disc? Don't answer—we can't have this topic degenerate into the discussion phase. I have some pills . . . Vittorio!"

Tom pitched his voice low, aiming it at Clinton's ear alone. "Look, maybe if I stay out of tonight's game . . ."

"Well, I'd really hate that, but *que sera.* Just so long as you're fit on Saturday, which is your biggie."

"Saturday," repeated Tom slowly to himself.

Clinton smiled smugly and stepped back into the launch. He waved his hand at the crew. "Lower away, me hearties!" he commanded with an expansive gesture. The puzzled crew, who spoke only Italian, hesitantly and slowly began to lower the boat, the block and tackle operating smoothly. As Clinton was lowered past the shining hull of the *Sheila,* he continued rapping to Tom and Philip, who leaned over the rail to watch.

Pointing to the little island of St. Pierre off the coast of Cannes, he asked grandly, "You like it? I love it. Tiny, tiny islands fascinate my ass. I have a crazy broker in London who sends me these brochures of islands for sale. All over the world, little impoverished islands . . ."

The motor launch was slowly lowered past the main deck, where Clinton cocked an eyebrow at Alice, who lay stretched out reading a book, and at

Anthony, who was concentrating deeply on making a house of cards balance.

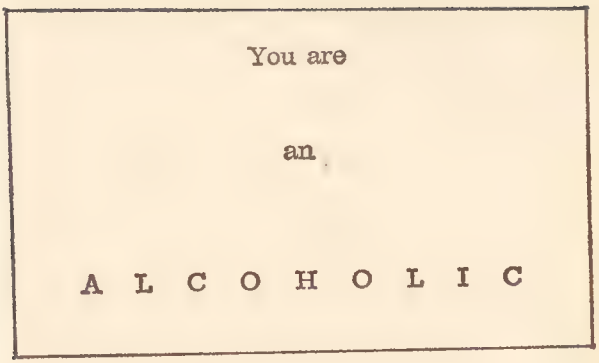
"A few thousand dollars in cash," Clinton continued, "and you're practically a king to six shepherds and their families or whatever. I read every word on every island, and then do you know what I do? I tear them neatly in half and I drop them in the waste basket and I say to myself . . ."

The launch passed the porthole of Christine's stateroom. She was sitting up in bed, eating a club sandwich. Lee sat next to her companionably. Christine waved guiltily at Clinton.

"I'm still weak," she chirruped, "but I'm taking solid foods!"

Clinton ignored her and continued as if she hadn't spoken. "And I say to myself if there's one thing I hate it's to have my island speech interrupted. And I say to myself, nope, you poor people, you don't deserve a good king. *That's* what I say."

The launch hit the water with a gentle splash. The engine blasted into life, and Clinton roared off to prepare the night's entertainment. Whatever *that* would be. It would have to go far to top the day.



CHAPTER VI

"Hi-de-hi-de-ho, gamesters! Everyone on the decky-wecky!" Clinton's words drifted up eerily through the fog. His motor launch rounded the bow, with Clinton standing up in it, shouting at them through his electric bullhorn.

They were all gathered on the afterdeck in the darkness, waiting for his instructions to begin. When they heard his voice, they assembled by the rail, looking down through the mist into the murky water, barely making out the launch or their host.

"Ah, there they are!" called Clinton. He swung his arm strongly and tossed up an oilskin bag. "Here they are, gang, read 'em and weep—clues for the evening! It's Hare and Hounds or Capture the Fag!" Tom caught the bag adroitly on the fly.

"The pill worked, huh?" bellowed Clinton.

Tom opened the waterproof bag and took out six travel brochures, distributing one to each of them.

"I really am touched," boomed Clinton, "by the way you people humor me day after day. The launch will be back to collect you in twenty minutes, so—" he ended in a sing-song—"be read-dy!" The motorboat started off noisily.

"Hold on!" Philip called after the launch. "Clinton! What are we looking for?"

As the boat disappeared into the fog, Clinton's voice reached back to them, a tendril of sound wisping in the night. "Tonight, the Homosexual!"

"In a monastery?" yelled Anthony.

"Where else?" came back faintly over the water.

Laughing, they unfolded their brochures and attempted to make them out.

"Read it, will you, Bunny?" Alice asked Anthony. "It's too dark. I can't see."

Anthony held his brochure up to the light coming from a deck fixture and read slowly, puzzling over the words.

"Okay. 'The Isle off the Church off St. Pierre . . .' " he stopped. "That must mean O-F, 'of' . . ."

Philip read his own copy silently as Anthony continued out loud.

" 'This isle, now largely uninhabited by modest fisher-folk, was once the domain of the now-devastating Monastery of Forgotten Men . . .' What is this," he demanded, "a put-on?"

Philip folded his brochure quietly, as Tom watched him. "Clinton's fine Italian hand," he remarked.

Anthony shrugged his broad shoulders and continued reading. " 'Travelers engulf from many lands

to the site of this former Eleventh Century refuge of perverts, onanists, catamites, and riff-raff of the day . . .' "

"We've got about fifteen minutes," Philip put in crisply.

"Just time enough for me to dress as a catamite," burbled Christine. "If I knew what it was."

The party split up to prepare. Lee and Tom walked quietly down the main stairway to the cabin deck. Tom seemed thoughtful, preoccupied.

"Honey," he said slowly, "I know this isn't the kind of junk you keep in your head, but . . ." He broke off, knitting his brows.

"But what?" Lee asked.

"Well, can you ever remember hearing any gossip about Alice being arrested?"

Lee lowered her voice. "For taking something from a store?" Tom nodded and opened the door to his own cabin, his brows still furrowed together.

Five minutes later, a towel around his waist, he walked through the connecting bathroom and tapped lightly at his wife's door.

"I'm grabbing a quick shower before we take off. I'll just be a minute, okay?"

There was no reply from Lee's cabin. Tom turned the knob and, opening the door, he stuck his head inside. "Okay?" he repeated.

Lee sat in the shadows of her cabin, smoking a cigarette. She looked up at him, searching his face. "Tom, do you think there's a homosexual on board this yacht?"

Tom turned the shower on full, and put his hand under, testing the water. "God, I don't know," he

flung over his shoulder. "Is there a dividing line today?"

"Don't patronize me," Lee snapped. She ground her cigarette butt out in an ashtray with a nervous gesture.

"Patronize? Is that really the word you mean? What's the matter now?"

Lee shrugged her fine shoulders. "I'm sorry," she sighed, with an expression of anxiety. She appeared to hesitate, then asked in a low voice, "Is this game only a game?"

"I'll be right out," said Tom. He shut the connecting door and stepped into the shower stall, reaching for the soap.

Lee lit another cigarette; then she rose, calling through the bathroom door, "I'll be up on deck." She left her cabin.

The water splashed hot and full on Tom's youthful body and ran in rivulets down the glass of the shower stall. The steady fall of water obscured all other sounds as Tom busied himself with lathering. He did not hear or see the door to the passageway open or someone step into his cabin. He didn't see the figure that moved stealthily toward the pile of discarded clothing heaped on the chair.

A hand reached out for the trousers, delving deep into a pocket and pulling out Tom's wallet. Snaking into the money section, the fingers pulled out a typed card, Tom's "secret" card. The figure held the card tightly in its hand, reading the message.

YOU are a
HIT-AND-RUN KILLER

There was a sound of flapping as of sails in the wind, or the heavy wings of gigantic birds.

The monastery loomed up Gothic and forbidding at the end of the narrow, rocky road at the top of the hill. Christine limped after the others, shaking water out of her shoe and trying to read her brochure by the feeble light of the cloud-obscured moon. She groaned softly to herself as she heard the sound of the motor launch departing below them.

Tom and Lee were in the lead, followed closely by Philip, Anthony, and Alice. They could hear the sound of flapping again.

"It's all rather like a Hammer film, isn't it?" remarked Anthony a trifle nervously, as if he expected to see Christopher Lee, fangs and all, come out of the bushes around the next turn in the road.

There was a rumble of thunder, right on cue.

"And he's got the Sound Department working overtime," kidded Tom.

Suddenly Alice gave a small shriek, as the shadowy figures of six hanged men loomed up suddenly in front of them. Lee shuddered involuntarily and took a step backward. The six "bodies" flapped emptily once more as the wind caught them. They were monks' robes, complete with cowls, hanging in a row on the monastery gate. Tacked above each was a slip of paper bearing one of the players' names, "Fra Christine," "Fra Philip," and so on. One for each of them. From the pocket of each robe protruded a flashlight. Alice drew a long, tremulous breath.

"I fear," said Philip coolly, "it's going to be a costume party."

In silence, they slipped the robes on, impressed despite themselves, and began to search for their instructions. On the outer wall surrounding the monastery, the beam of Tom's flashlight picked out a sign, lettered in gothic script: In These Ruins Monks' Robes Must Be Worn at All Times in Respect for the Departed Brothers. There were several other lines of printing below, and Tom read them out loud.

"Evening Tour commences at nine P.M. and ends at nine-thirty regardless. To begin before will enrage the spirit of Fra Pervertus, which may oft be heard roaming the night, begging forgiveness for his misdeeds. The vows of silence must be strictly observed, so keep . . ." He stopped, the others crowding around him.

"Keep what, keep what? I'm scared!" chattered Christine.

Tom's flashlight illuminated the letters: The Vows of Silence Must Be Strictly Observed, So Keep Your Fat Trap Shut, Christine. As they all snickered, Tom looked at his watch. It was 8:59. He suddenly tilted his head up, as if listening for something faintly heard.

"I'm cold! What time is it?" whimpered Christine.

Tom held up his hand for silence. "Shhh." Taking his cue, they all listened, straining to hear. From the distance came a thin sound, faint but clear, the sing-song of a monk praying in Latin. Alice shivered, recognizing Clinton's voice.

"It begins," said Philip. He pushed open the gate in the wall and stepped back to let the women pass through first. Anthony tossed away his cigarette and followed. Tom and Philip started forward at the same instant, bumping into each other. With elaborate bows, they played Alphonse and Gaston for a moment, then Philip preceded Tom through the gate.

The courtyard of the monastery, into which they stepped with hesitation, had been used for centuries as a graveyard. Wooden crosses straggled through the weeds and hedges, reaching crooked fingers to the leaden sky. As if by signal, the six put up their cowls and, instantly, it was almost impossible to tell them apart. The praying grew louder, and the six stood, listening.

"That's Clinton," breathed Christine.

"This is weird," Alice echoed.

"All we have to do is find him," said Anthony briskly, switching on his flashlight and heading toward the sound of Clinton's voice.

"Vows of silence, vows of silence," chided Philip in pedantic tones.

Lee started after Anthony. Suddenly, from another direction, a second monk's voice cut through the chilly air, stopping Lee and Anthony in their tracks, bewildered. The others exchanged puzzled looks. Yet another song of prayer was heard from yet another direction; then several more. The night was filled with a multitude of Clintons, all praying piously in Latin, backed up by Gregorian chant. Lee's eyes darted as she listened intently to the holy chorus.

Baffled and frustrated, Anthony could only choke out, "What?"

"It's 'The Sound of Music,' for God's sake," complained Alice. "How are we supposed to know which—"

"We're wasting time," cut in Philip. He moved across the graveyard toward the ruined church. The others fanned out in different directions. Christine hesitated a moment, then picked Tom. She started out after him, calling defensively, "Well, I've had a hard day, and I'm scared." Then she stopped and shrugged her shoulders. With a sigh, she switched on her flashlight and started off in a direction of her own. She sang nervously in a childish voice, "Come out, come out, wherever you are." Christine wished this night was over.

The church was a nearly-gutted ruin, its shattered and arched windows letting in the lowering night sky. Inside, the church was lit only by the flickering light cast by two huge sacred beeswax candles, each in a tall heavy wrought-iron candleholder. The rest of the gloomy ancient building stood in darkness.

Clinton sat gloating in the priest's box. This was the best game yet, the most exciting and dramatic one he had ever devised. The interior of the chapel was supported by four vaulted pillars, partly destroyed. He'd lit a large candle here, too; it stood near the center of the large wooden confessional in an iron candelabrum.

The confessional itself was divided into three sections. On either end were penitents' boxes, which could be entered through single side doors left and right. In the center, the priest's box opened from the

front, in which was set a small door. The priest's door had a grille to let air in, made of small strips of lathed wood, Jacobean style. This grille was now partly broken, and Clinton had tacked up a curtain behind it, screening him from view.

He sat in the priest's chair, chortling to himself. The penitents' boxes were arranged so that the priest could hear two confessions without the penitents seeing each other. The box on the right still had a small sliding panel on the priest's side, but the one on the left had long since lost its panel, keeping only a partial grille. It was the perfect set-up, thought Clinton. They'd have a lot of trouble finding him, and when they did, they'd die!

Anthony tiptoed down into the well of the crypt, shining his flashlight around. The monk's voice came to him strongly from inside. He had hesitated upstairs, listening to all the other chanting voices, undecided which of them to follow, when he'd heard a cough below, interrupting the prayer. Smiling smugly, he'd taken the stone stairs down to the crypt. Now he whispered confidentially.

"Clinton? What am I supposed to do? Look, I know it's the real you, I heard you cough. The others are on tape, right?"

The beam of his flashlight picked up a cassette player, lying on the floor of the crypt. Written on it in large luminescent letters was the word "WRONG."

"Balls," said Anthony.

Philip walked with sure step into the church, moving with determination. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing. From the well of the crypt

the monk's voice swelled up, backed by Gregorian chant. Philip smiled but did not stop to look. He headed straight down the aisle toward the front of the church. About halfway down he stopped, cocking his head to listen. Sure enough, he could hear yet another monk's voice praying behind the wall.

The dim beam of Philip's flashlight played on the wall, revealing a half-open door set in it. It was the door to the chapel. Philip gave it a push. It creaked open with a loud noise; the voice inside, and the Gregorian chant as well, grew louder. He walked in.

Once inside the chapel, Philip headed without hesitation to the confessional. The voice was clearly emanating from the priest's box. Philip shined his flashlight on the grille, but the curtain that Clinton had affixed behind it prevented him from seeing in. He tugged at the center door, but it wouldn't open. Clinton was sitting inside, holding the door tightly shut with his left hand.

Going around to the penitent's box on the right, Philip tried to open the side door. It moved a little, then stuck fast. He rattled the latch and yanked at it again, but it wouldn't budge. He moved around it, past the candleholder and the priest's door, and tried the side door on the left-hand confession box. It opened easily, and he stepped inside.

Philip knelt in the darkness, in front of the grille that separated the confessor from the penitent. The sliding panel was missing, and the grille itself was made of plain wooden strips, partly broken. He turned his flashlight beam onto the grille. At first, all he could see was the cowl. Then Clinton slowly

turned his head until he was facing Philip, grinning at him through the broken grille.

Philip gasped. Under his cowl Clinton wore a long wig of tumbling chestnut-colored hair; large tinted sunglasses hid his eyes. His thin mouth was shaped into full curves by lipstick. He looked exactly like a grotesque parody of Alice Wood.

"That's disgusting," Philip grimaced. "But clever."

Clinton, pleased, put a finger to his rouged lips. "Shhh. Don't ruin it."

"You're supposed to be Alice, I gather."

"And *you're* supposed to be in the other box so I can use the slider." Clinton reached behind him and demonstrated the little sliding panel on the right-hand box.

"Much more effective," Philip agreed. "But the door's stuck."

"Damn," Clinton muttered in annoyance. He hated to have a single detail less than perfect. "How'd you find me so fast?" he asked.

"That 'aisle off the church' pun in the brochure. Not up to par, Your Eminence," Philip replied.

Clinton got up from the priest's chair. "I'll fix the door," he said, sliding the grille door shut. He stepped out of the priest's box, and Philip out of the penitent's.

"They must have loused it up when they moved it," Clinton whispered, tugging on the door to the right-hand confession box. He began fiddling with the handle, trying to get the door to move, but it was stuck fast.

"Can I help?" Philip offered.

"Just piss off, my son."

Philip left the chapel, glancing back over his shoulder. Clinton, his cowl now up to cover the wig, was still pulling at the door handle.

Tom clenched his jaws in a scowl as his flashlight picked up the word "WRONG" on the tape-player. He turned quickly as he heard footsteps, looking back over his shoulder and switching off his light. Philip was coming down the aisle of the church. Ignoring the music welling up from the crypt, he stopped to light a cigarette, then, like a man who had completed his business, he strode out of the church.

Tom thought for a few seconds, then moved off quickly in the direction from which Philip had come. He stopped outside the chapel door, listening to the swell of the chanting. Then he switched his flash on and entered.

Clinton was still tugging vainly at the door to the right-hand box, cursing under his breath. Tom stood in the chapel doorway watching him in amusement for a second, but the candleholder, interposed between him and Clinton, obscured his view.

"For shame," he said, stepping forward. Startled, Clinton straightened up. Hastily drawing his cowl around his face, he headed for the priest's box, beckoning Tom to the penitent's box on the left. He was really pissed off. The effect would be ruined.

In the winery, the beam from the batteries weakly illuminated the interior of a huge empty wine cask, picking up a mouse, which scampered away from

the cassette player. On top of the player was the word "WRONG."

"Damn," snarled the hooded figure. It smacked the side of the cask in anger and rushed up the stairs.

Clinton's face, wig, glasses, lipstick, appeared like a macabre waxwork through the grille in the beam of Tom's flashlight.

"Wanna kiss me?" whispered Clinton, leering grossly.

"You could do with a little more rouge," said Tom.

"Is the volume too high? From out there?"

"Too low, if anything."

Clinton leaned wearily back in his chair, turning his profile to the left-hand grille. "Nothing's going right," he complained. "I'll have to open the door wider."

The music came pouring down the twisting stone stairway leading to the roof. The cowled figure rushed up the stairs and came out on a flat, ungabled portion of the roof. The clouds were scudding fast over the sky; the moon had been completely obliterated. The wind was rising, pushing the clouds ahead of it. The beam of the flashlight played over the roof, chasing the music. In an instant, it had found it: a tape recorder-player, with one word on it—"WRONG." In a rage, the cowled figure swept the cassette player off the roof to the graveyard below.

Christine waved her flashlight wildly and haphaz-

ardly over the interior of the darkened church. Music sounded from the crypt, and she moved toward it, singing tonelessly.

" 'I feel a song coming on . . .' Clinton?"

Christine jumped as the chapel door creaked open. She heard the singing coming clearly from within, and swung her beam in the direction of the sound, moving slowly toward the chapel.

" 'Come out, come out, wherever you are,' " she intoned. A long, low rumble of thunder made her shiver. Looking up at the sky, Christine wisecracked, "Just give us the news, please."

She was now standing outside the chapel door. She touched it with the tip of her finger. It creaked. Rolling her eyes, she started inside.

Clinton was moving toward the penitent's box on the right. Christine could not see his face, because the heavy candleholder was in the way, and because the softly cursing figure held its cowl closely to its face.

"Am I the first?" she asked brightly.

Tugging at the right-hand side door with all his strength, Clinton gave it a mighty yank. The door came open, scraping along the floor, then it stopped, sticking in an open position. Clinton tried to close it, but he couldn't, tried to move it, but it wouldn't budge further. It had come off its frame.

Christine came further into the room, then stopped. "All right, now what? Who's the fag?"

Clinton beckoned her to the box on the right, heading himself for the priest's box in the middle. Christine entered through the newly opened door. She knelt, shining her light up at the grille. Behind

the latticed framework, the sliding panel was shut. Twisting her head, she looked over her shoulder, out her door.

"Don't leave me," she whined. "Clinton? I hate being scared. Don't scare—" She broke off with a girlish scream of fright as the panel suddenly slid open, revealing Clinton in his bizarre drag.

"Shhh," he cautioned.

Christine lowered her voice to an excited whisper. "Then Alice has the Homosexual card?" she asked in delight, terribly pleased with herself.

The wigged and rouged head leaned back in profile, sighing wearily. His voice was a hissing whisper.

"Just keep your voice down and get the hell out."

Christine didn't move. Admiringly, she whispered, "This is just the best game I've ever—"

The panel slid shut with a bang, cutting off her enthusiastic words.

"—played," she finished lamely, getting up from her knees. She left the box, giving a little start as she saw the cowled figure standing silently in the chapel doorway.

"Oh, darling, it's brilliant!" Christine gushed as she passed the figure quickly on her way out of the chapel. The hooded person didn't move or turn its head. Motionless, it whispered into the dim chapel, "Clinton?" Quietly, the figure closed the chapel door and bolted it.

Stepping quietly, it moved toward the priest's box, stopping in front of the curtained grille, through which nothing could be seen.

"Clinton," came the harsh whisper, "I want to talk to you."

"Into the booth," came an answering whisper from inside.

"We're going to talk, whether you like it or not," threatened the shadowy figure as it slipped into the right-hand penitent's box.

The wind had brought the clouds and the clouds had brought the rain. Outside, the candles guttered in the downpour, and the letters of the names on the fence slowly washed away. Inside the church, Alice looked up in terror as a fierce bolt of lightning crackled across the open windows, followed by the crash of thunder very close by. The thunder was followed by a loud crash from within, a crash that sounded from the chapel. Alice whirled around at the noise, terrified once more.

The wrought-iron candleholder had smashed completely through the front grille of the priest's box. The cowled figure, with an effort, moved the heavy thing upright again. As the front door was relieved of the weight of it, it swung open. Clinton's body slumped out from behind the door and fell heavily to the chapel floor. The blood poured from his crushed head. The figure dropped the candelabrum, letting it clatter noisily to the floor.

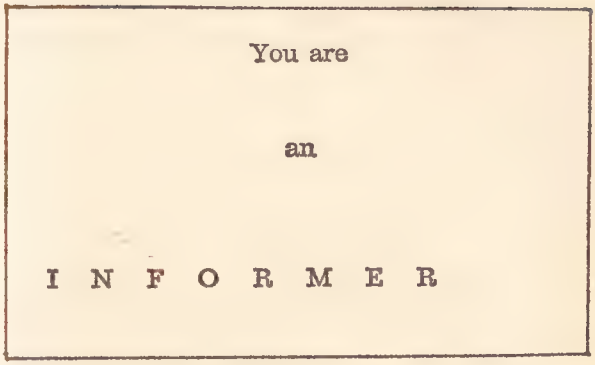
Alice moved hesitantly down the church aisle to investigate the noise. She hated this game, but only she could put an end to it. For hers was the card with the "secret," and she was the only one who *had* to find the "proof."

The cowled figure ran to the chapel door, bent on

escape. As its hand reached for the bolt, the door handle rattled. Someone outside was trying to get in.

Alice tried the handle of the chapel door. It was locked. "Hello? Clinton?" she whispered. She tried the handle again, twisting and turning it this way and that. "Is somebody there?" she called softly. "What's going on?" She moved her foot back hastily as she heard a slithering sound at her feet. Looking down, she gasped. Then, shouting, she began to pound on the door.

"Hey! That's not fair, Clinton! You can't do that!" She waited a moment, but there was no response from behind the locked chapel door. In frustration she pounded the wood with her fist, then moved grimly off, tossing the cowl off her head, and leaving behind her, on the floor of the aisle, the sign that had been shoved out under the door. The sign reading "The Game Is Over."



CHAPTER VII

By morning the storm had passed and the rain had stopped, but a heritage of gray skies remained. The *Sheila* rested at anchor in the harbor of St. Pierre. Above her loomed the hill and the ancient, ruined monastery, adding to the gothic gloom of the day.

The six of them sat at brunch in an uncomfortable silence. They couldn't help staring at Clinton's empty chair, wondering. It was as though he had been the epoxy that had welded them into conversation and activity.

Vittorio came onto the dining deck from the lounge and bent to whisper into Philip's ear. Philip nodded silently, and Vittorio returned to the salon.

"Vittorio thought that Guido had picked him up, and vice versa," Philip informed the others. "But he

isn't in port, and he hasn't slept in his bed." He looked across the table at Tom, who raised his eyebrows significantly.

"It's part of the game! A clue!" Anthony offered.

"He didn't fill in the scoreboard," Philip reminded them.

"Maybe he's still romping around Dragonwyck," brayed Christine.

"Or lying in a box of earth with a stake through his heart," Anthony said, his mind still on Christopher Lee.

"He seemed edgy last night," Tom offered. "But then the door was stuck and the cassette wasn't loud enough and—"

"What door?" Alice interrupted.

"The confessional, darling," drawled Christine from her superior position of actually having scored.

"Hey!" said Tom, an idea growing in his brain.

"Come on, who cares about the game at this point?" Christine's brassy voice struck a shrill note of fear. "Something's flooey! Where is he?" Her hand with its heavy rings trembled on her coffee cup, and her large eyes, circled blackly by thickly mascaraed eyelashes, sought reassurance from the others.

They stood in a tightly clustered group, looking down at the sign on the floor in front of the chapel door. "The Game Is Over." Tom, in the forefront, reached out and turned the handle on the chapel door. It opened easily at his push.

"That's funny . . ." muttered Alice as they all

trooped inside. She stopped short, bumping into Tom and Philip, who stood motionless just inside the door, the others crowding in behind them.

"Jesus!" breathed Tom softly.

Alice looked over his shoulder and stifled a scream. The others, too, were crying out in horror and astonishment; Christine screamed loudly.

"Out! Out!" ordered Anthony, herding the women back toward the door. He pushed Christine hard as she started to protest. "Just out!" He escorted them firmly out, closing the door behind him.

Tom and Philip approached Clinton's body slowly. It lay, face up, under one of the columns. The face had been smashed almost beyond recognition. The wig and glasses were missing, but traces of lipstick were visible around the dead man's mouth. In Clinton's hand was the cassette player that had been with him in the priest's box.

Stone fragments from the column lay scattered all around the body; a particularly large one lay near the battered head. Tom looked up. A large piece of the column's acanthus-leaf capital was missing. Evidently, it had fallen on Clinton's head in some grisly accident. Philip looked up, too, then down again at the large stone by Clinton's head.

"Apparently there *is* a God," he murmured. Kneeling, Philip turned Clinton over slightly. There was dried blood on the back of his cowl.

"Don't," protested Tom, holding his hand out to Philip in a restraining gesture. He turned toward the confessional, a puzzled look on his face, scanning it and the chapel carefully. More rubble and acanthus-

carved stones stood in the corner. The iron candle-holder, with its candle, stood in its accustomed place. The confessional appeared to be as it had been, the right-hand box door open and the priest's door shut. Only the Jacobean lathed grille was missing from in front of the curtain.

The chapel door opened and closed with a creak as Anthony entered. "It must have been that fierce lightning-bolt," he said. "Loosened the keystone. What'll we do with the ladies?"

"Tell them to wait," said Philip, plucking at his lower lip as Anthony left to deliver the message.

"Shouldn't we notify the authorities?" asked Tom, his handsome face drawn into a frown.

"On an island with two cafés and a weaver?" Philip was amused.

"There's something wrong here," insisted Tom.

"Where's your fingerprint kit?" scoffed the older man laconically.

Tom knelt by the body again, his face a mask of puzzlement. He examined the large stone near Clinton's head, turning it over. It was covered in dried blood. Looking up at the column again, at its curly-topped acanthus ornamentation, he checked over the other three columns as well; all of them were acanthus-leaved, scarred, cracked, and broken in numerous places. As Philip stooped to examine Clinton's body, Tom stood slowly, looking at the large, blood-stained stone in his hand, turning it over and over. It was deeply grooved.

Philip uttered a low exclamation and withdrew a six-inch piece of plain wood from the folds of Clin-

ton's robe. He knelt down to examine it. Tom, seeing the wood, let his gaze travel to the empty grille-hole on the priest's door. Philip followed Tom's gaze and, rising, went to the penitent's box on the right. He tried and failed to move the sprung door.

"I see Clinton finally got this door open. Breaking it in the process, as usual."

The chapel door creaked open again, and Anthony stuck his head in. "Alice is sick," he reported. "We're going back to the landing."

Philip came around to the front of the confessional and opened the priest's door. The interior of the box appeared untouched; the panel on the right was closed. Philip slid it open, revealing the broken grillework, then turned his attention to the broken grille-work in the left-hand box, the one with no panel. Suddenly spotting something on the floor of the priest's room, he hunched down to see it better.

It was a full-length filter-tip cigarette butt, the filter slightly flattened, the center crushed. Clinging to it still was an ash about an inch long. Philip picked it up with a little difficulty; it was stuck to the floor slightly and, as he pulled it away, he saw the small scar it left on the wooden floor of the box.

"What?" queried Tom, standing behind him to look over Philip's shoulder. Philip stood up and held out the butt to Tom.

"Another vital clue," he drawled with mild sarcasm.

Tom frowned. He spoke sharply to the other

man. "Clinton didn't smoke . . . cigarettes." Their eyes met and locked in silence.

They gathered in the lounge, surrounded by the games and puzzles that the late Clinton Greene had so preferred to real life. The women looked suddenly older, drained and careless of their appearance, especially Christine, who drooped on the couch, shoulders slumped, hair a tousled mess, and legs sprawled out at unflattering angles.

Philip stood at the bar, trying to dislodge ice from the congealed mass in the bucket without a pick. He was rapping the bucket sharply on the bar, frowning at his lack of success. The captain, now an important and respectable figure once more, not a man to be chivvied and insulted, appeared taller somehow. He wore his full uniform, cap included, as he made his report.

"There is no seaplane of avail in Cannes. The police will arrive late tonight or early in the morning. By craft. It consumes six or eight hours. We will harbor here until."

"That means an inquest, and reporters," said Alice.

"Get your left profile ready," Christine bristled tartly.

"Shut up, Christine!" snapped Anthony. "Well, they can't very well bury him at sea," he said.

"No," put in Philip over his shoulder from his station at the bar. "There's too much pollution in the Mediterranean already."

"Poor Clinton," sighed Alice. "It's such a shame. It would have been such a big grosser for him." She

caught the others looking at her and shrugged her perfect shoulders, explaining, " 'The Last of Sheila.' "

"He's dead!" Christine burst out, tears filming her eyes and sticking wetly to her lashes. "What are you talking about some goddam movie! He's dead!"

They all turned to stare at her in astonishment, at the unholy spectacle of her tears. A genuine emotion caught them unawares, and they hardly knew how to respond to it. Christine raised her chin defiantly. Turning to Philip, she shouted, "And will you stop hocking that ice bucket?"

Philip stopped at once, reaching into the bucket for some loosened ice, which he dropped quietly into his glass, adding brandy and a splash.

"I want my Bloody Mary straight up," Christine ordered, the tears gone now from her face and her voice. The rest of them relaxed.

"Me, too," Lee chimed in. "Bourbon." She looked guiltily across the room at her husband, who shot her a warning glance. Lee returned his look with a pleading one of her own.

"Clinton's . . . ah . . . misadventure is unfortunate," Anthony announced pompously, "but an accident is an accident and a film is a film." An embarrassed silence fell, during which everybody tried to digest this piece of gratuitous wisdom.

Tom broke the silence. "Has it occurred to anybody that this isn't the first accident? Yesterday, the propeller. Last night, the stone."

"What are you talking about?" asked Alice.

"Suppose," Tom continued seriously, "the propeller *wasn't* an accident. Suppose it was . . . a mis-

take." He looked around the room, waiting for comprehension to sink in.

Lee's hand shot up to her mouth as she understood the meaning of Tom's words. "You mean somebody was trying to kill *Clinton?*"

"Why should anybody want to kill Chris?" asked Tom with cool logic.

"Yeah," grinned Christine. "We're not in Hollywood."

"Ah, come *off* it," Anthony scoffed.

"Look." Tom seemed determined to get them all to understand. "*I* assumed Clinton was swimming near the propeller—I heard him yelling. Didn't you?" he shot at Anthony. "Didn't we all?"

Into the bewildered silence that followed Tom's words, Philip said with quiet curiosity, "What fantasies are you building?"

"Who did not solve the game last night?" asked Tom abruptly. Only Alice and Anthony raised their hands. Tom turned to Alice.

"Why did you say 'That's funny' just now? When we were outside the chapel?"

"Because it was locked when I left last night," she said slowly, her lovely brow furrowed in a frown.

Tom turned back to the others. "Then all I want to know is, why was it unlocked today, and why did Clinton put the sign out?"

"Because the game was over," answered Anthony.

"It was," Alice cried excitedly, "but it shouldn't have been! *I* had the Homosexual card and it should have gone on until I found him."

"Exactly," said Tom, satisfied.

There was a sudden mystified silence. Alice lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, cupping her lighter in both hands to hold it still.

"There were some interesting points in that chapel," Tom continued.

Anthony snorted contemptuously.

"Apart from Clinton's body, you mean," said Philip quietly.

"Interesting, how?" Anthony demanded to know. "He obviously was leaving—the cassette player was in his hand—the storm shook the place, and a stone fell on him."

"Not unless he was crawling," stated Tom.

"Crawling?" croaked Christine.

"The stone that fell on Clinton's head came from the *base* of the column."

. . . All of them were acanthus-leaved, scarred, cracked, and broken in numerous places. Tom stood slowly, looking at the large, bloodstained stone in his hand, turning it over and over. It was deeply grooved.

"It was grooved," Tom explained. "The tops of the columns are shaped like acanthus leaves, the bottoms are grooved. Interesting point number one." He took a flat, six-inch piece of wood from his pocket. "Then, there's this piece of wood."

"What's that?" asked Lee, leaning forward in her chair to see it better.

"I found it in the folds of Clinton's robe," said Philip.

"It's from the grille on the door to the priest's box," Tom said.

"Interesting point number two," conceded Philip.

"I didn't see any grille on the priest's door," Anthony declared stubbornly.

"Oh, right," smiled Tom with a lift of his brows. "You never found Clinton, you said."

"What do you mean, he *said?*" Alice demanded indignantly.

"There *was* a grille last night," Tom explained, "but not this morning. That grille was removed. Why? And where's the rest of it? And what was this"—he reached into his pocket again and carefully removed the cigarette butt, laying it in the palm of his hand for the others to see—"doing in the priest's box? Clinton didn't smoke cigarettes."

Everybody stared at it for the length of a heartbeat, then Lee put out her slim hand and took it from Tom. "Newport," she announced.

All eyes swung over to Alice, who sat with her long legs crossed, smoking a Newport. She glared back at the others, puffing defiantly; then her eyes stole to Anthony's.

"I'm not the only one who smokes Newports," she said to her husband. Then she tossed her long hair back. "Come on," she growled at the others. "There's cartons all over the ship!"

Lee held up her own cigarette pack. Newports. "I smoke them, too," she offered.

"What's the diff?" asked Christine, genuinely puzzled.

Tom turned his gaze on her. "Did *you* smoke in there?" Christine shook her head.

"You?" He turned to Anthony.

"I never found him."

Tom lowered his lids like enigmatic hoods over his eyes. "Of course," he said flatly. "I forgot. Honey?" Tom addressed his wife.

"I may have. I don't remember," shrugged Lee.

"But surely not in the priest's box."

"No, of course not," Lee agreed. She frowned in concentration, but Tom had turned his attention to Philip.

Philip shook his head slowly, his lower lip pursed. There was a long pause in which nobody said anything.

"Interesting point number three," mused Tom. "A cigarette nobody smoked." His words were met with another silence. Tom lifted his chin and spoke a little more loudly, every syllable clear. "See, I don't believe Clinton died near the pillar at all." He turned to Philip, who watched him with a frown. "I think he died in the priest's box. And not from a stone, falling or otherwise."

"Then *what happened?*" squeaked Christine, her excitement at fever pitch.

Tom took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I think he was about to leave when somebody—"

The lightning flash lit up the chapel for a fraction of a second, revealing a glimpse of the wigged and rouged head in the slit between the curtains behind the lathed grille. The cowled figure lifted the heavy candlestick with an extraordinary strength and brought it crashing down, smashing through the grille with all its might.

"—I'm not saying one of us, but *somebody*—came in. He smashed through the grille—"

"With what, pray tell?" Philip interrupted.

"I don't know," Tom admitted. "Maybe something he brought with him."

The wrought-iron candleholder had smashed completely through the front grille of the priest's box. The cowled figure, with an effort, moved the heavy thing upright again. As the front door was relieved of the weight of it, it swung open. Clinton's body slumped out from behind the door and fell heavily to the chapel floor. The blood poured from his crushed head. The figure dropped the candelabrum, letting it clatter noisily to the floor.

"He or *she*," Christine corrected.

"The candleholder, perhaps?" Philip asked gently.

"That crossed my mind," agreed Tom.

Alice tried the handle of the chapel door. It was locked. "Hello? Clinton?" she whispered.

"Maybe it was an accident," said Lee.

She tried the handle again, twisting and turning it this way and that.

"Maybe." Tom's voice was skeptical. "But at any rate, somebody decided to make it *look* like an accident."

"Is anybody there?" she called softly. "What's going on?"

"See, I'm theorizing that he—or she—stood there assessing the situation for a moment—"

The cowled figure stood leaning against the locked chapel door, smoking and watching the doorknob twist.

"—which could account for the cigarette—"

With a sudden determination, it hurried back to the priest's box. The body lay slumped on the floor. Stooping, the person in the robe picked up its flashlight and switched it on. The beam lit up the interior of the box, with the sign "The Game Is Over," lying next to the body, on top of the cassette player. Flicking the cigarette away, the hooded figure picked up the sign and carried it back to the chapel door, slipping it out underneath.

"—and slipped the sign under the door to be sure there wouldn't be any more interruptions—"

Taking the body by the ankles, the hooded person dragged Clinton slowly and painfully across the chapel floor, bringing him to rest under the pillar, face up.

"—and then dragged Clinton over, placing him under the pillar—"

The robed and cowled figure stooped down, its hand searching for a stone of the right size. Closing around the large, heavy, grooved stone, the hand lifted it high into the air and smashed it down into the dead man's face.

"—and smashed the stone down, thereby making his first mistake. He assumed the stone was from the *top* of the column. It wasn't. But then there was very little light."

The cowled figure returned to the priest's box and picked up the tape-player, bringing it over to the body and placing the handle in his dead hand.

"Now there was the problem of the wood," Tom continued.

"What problem?" asked Lee.

"Darling, he couldn't very well leave the grille broken."

Using the candelabrum as a gouge, the figure scooped out the rest of the Jacobean grille, leaving a clean hole. It set the candleholder back up again and, with the aid of the flashlight, set about collecting the thin fragments of wood from the floor of the priest's box.

"He hoped it would go unnoticed if the frame was empty. Unfortunately—second mistake—one piece had lodged in Clinton's robe."

The flashlight beam moved briskly around the chapel, checking everything out. It stopped at the candle, lying on the floor, and the figure stooped down and picked it up, setting it back in its holder. The light rested for a moment on the priest's box, its interior empty, its door standing open. Still clutching the slim fragments of lathed wood, the hand reached out and shut the door.

"The only thing left to do then—"

The figure stood at the chapel door, listening intently to Alice's footsteps as they died away. Ever so quietly, with the greatest of care, it unbolted the door, opening it an inch at a time so it wouldn't squeak. Then, pulling its cowl even closer to its face, the shadowy figure slipped out and shut the door behind itself.

"—was to get rid of the splintered pieces."

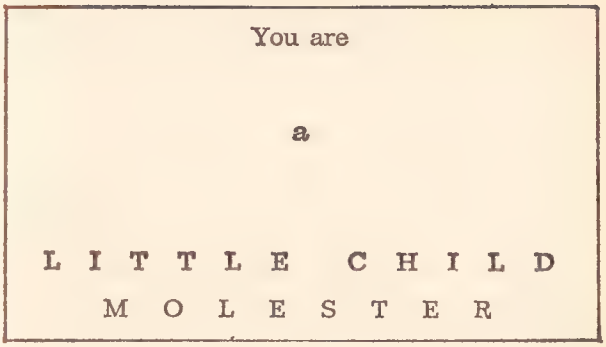
Outside the church, on the cloister walk, the cowled person looked around in the rain. Nobody was in sight. With a swift motion of its robed arm, the person hurled its handful of sticks into the heart of the high grass that surrounded the cloister.

"Probably into the sea," Tom concluded.

Silence gripped the salon like the claws of a falcon. Each of them sat or stood apart from all the others, purged as though by the fire of a Greek tragedy, silent with his or her own thoughts.

"Wow," breathed Anthony, not daring to meet the others' eyes.

Tom shrugged. "And the game was over," was all he said.



CHAPTER VIII

Philip opened the ice bucket with a clatter. The ice inside had melted together into an impossible mass. He looked around again for the ice pick and, not finding it, resumed his hammering with a heavy bottle-opener.

"Hell," Christine broke out. "I think we can agree that none of *us* did it, can't we? I mean, who would?" She waved her hands around in confusion. "I really mean who *wouldn't,* but I mean who *really* would?"

"Right!" Alice rushed to support Christine. "We aren't the only people around here! *If* Clinton was murdered, it could've been dozens of people. Like there must be a lot of crazy peasants on this island. *Or . . .*" she looked around her, lowering her voice, "how about the weirdos on this boat? How about"—she mouthed the word—"Vittorio?"

"That's not what Tom's been saying. He's been saying one of us did it. Haven't you been listening?" Anthony asked angrily.

"Hold it, please," begged Tom.

"Well, *I* don't feel accused," snapped Christine. "That's . . ."

"Hold it!" Tom was close to shouting.

"I feel personally accused," Anthony said with bitterness.

"I'm sorry," Tom apologized. "I was just exploring. I haven't accused anyone."

"Yet," said Philip quietly.

Tom put up a hand to quell the impending storm of argument. "Just let me get this out," he said. "Five minutes, and then I'm going to have five Scotches and take a long nap."

"Tom, you think you know who?" asked his wife.

"No, but—"

"Stop telling us what you don't know," interrupted Alice, her beautiful face flushed dark with irritation. "Tell us what you *do* know!"

"Well . . . there *is* someone who might clear this up for us."

"Who?" asked Lee.

"Clinton."

They all fell silent, staring at Tom as if he'd just announced the Second Coming.

"So help me God," Christine swore, balling her small hand into a fist, "if this is all a hoax and he waltzes through that door now, he gets a cut-glass ashtray right between the eyes."

Tom smiled at Christine. "There's no hoax," he assured her. "Clinton's dead, all right."

"Say what's on your mind," demanded Anthony, scowling at Tom.

"Okay." Tom crossed over to Lee. Bending over and putting his lips close to her ear, he said to her in an undertone, "Watch their faces." He took the drink from her hand—"Mind?"—and sipped it, carrying it away with him.

"Make me another," Lee said with great clarity to Philip, who merely nodded and filled another glass for her.

Tom took up his stance by the bar. He looked around at his audience, holding them with the intensity of his dark eyes. "I think it's tied up to the game we've been playing this week. Do you all have the cards that Clinton handed out the first night?"

"Aren't we past that?" asked Anthony, his voice dripping with scorn. Tom didn't bother to reply. "I'm not sure *where* mine is," Anthony continued, his face an angry mask. The veins stood out in his forehead, and his huge hands clenched themselves into fists.

Tom continued to ignore the threat, and an uncomfortable silence fell. Alice's husband looked around the room defiantly, but nobody except Tom would meet his gaze. Deflated, his defiance evaporated, Anthony capitulated. "Well, I'll have a look through my things." He walked out of the lounge and down the steps to the cabin deck.

Lee rose gracefully to take her drink from Philip, who moved thoughtfully away from the bar and into the center of the room. In one extravagant gesture,

Christine turned her handbag upside down on the couch beside her. Out of its depths tumbled an astonishing clutter in amazing variety. Including a pack of Newports.

"Whoops!" she yelled, tossing the cigarettes over her shoulder.

Alice stood up and pulled her card from the pocket of her slacks, remarking to Philip with a small, bitter smile, "I wonder how we're gonna feel an hour from now."

Philip removed his own card carefully from his wallet. "As soon as Tom finishes writing the scene, I'll tell you what attitude to play," he reassured her. "I've done it before."

Lee joined her husband at the bar, putting one soft hand gently on his shoulder. He smiled ruefully at her.

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't started all this," he said softly to her.

"You could stop right now," she reminded him.

He shook his dark head. "But it's going to be interesting," he said with a lift of his eyebrow. He bent to kiss her lightly on the cheek and looked up questioningly as Anthony reappeared at the lounge door, his typewritten card in his hand.

"Okay?" Tom asked of everybody. "Thanks. Now, forgetting all the mysterioso, will everyone put their cards—if you'll pardon the expression—on the table?"

The others gathered around the table, tossing their cards down. Tom rearranged them face up in the center, as they crowded around to look. YOU are a HOMOSEXUAL; YOU are a LITTLE

CHILD MOLESTER; YOU are an EX-CONVICT; YOU are an INFORMER; YOU are a SHOPLIFTER. A murmur of excitement swelled as they read the cards.

"Informer?" asked Alice.

"Ex-Convict?" from Christine.

"And Child Molester," added Tom.

"That's only five," said Anthony. "Who has the other one?"

Philip looked at Tom, a question in his eyes. "Tom?"

All eyes were on Tom as he held up his smooth white card, blank side out. "I'll show mine in a minute."

Philip frowned, looking at the card. He opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind.

But Anthony showed no such hesitation. "I want to see it now!" he demanded.

Philip held up his hand in a placatory gesture. "Let's give him a chance, shall we?" Anthony's face darkened and the muscle in his jaw twitched, but he managed to control himself and said nothing. Tom placed his card face down on the table and nodded to the others, who dispersed to take seats in different parts of the large salon.

"All right," Tom began. "We all know about two of these 'secrets,' we've played them: Shoplifter and Homosexual. The others we're seeing for the first time. Ex-Convict, Informer, and Child—" he looked down at the cards on the table—"excuse me, *Little* Child Molester. And mine."

He looked around the room, holding everybody's eyes in turn. "So this," he continued, "was Clinton's

idea for a week of fun—him assigning secrets, us discovering them. And it was a good game. But some of us began to suspect that there was more to it than met the eye. That Clinton had *not* chosen these six secrets at random, but that each player had been at some time in his life 'guilty' "—his fingers drew quotation marks in the air—"of one of them."

"Oh, no," moaned Christine softly.

"*Not* guilty of the secret he was assigned," Tom went on. "Clinton was a far more elegant game-player than that, and he certainly didn't want us refusing to play on the first night, which we might well have done if we'd been assigned our *own* secrets. So it was more than a game, it was a private joke." He looked around the room again, seeing fear in every face.

"What does your card say?" Anthony insisted again.

Tom held up his hand. "In a minute," he promised. "Look, a man is dead. Evidence indicates that it's murder, *and* we've discovered that the murdered man was playing a sadistic game with his guests—a game whose central theme was six hidden shreds from the past." He paused. "Any questions?" He waited.

Then, "But, he knew I never meant to—" Christine spoke dully to nobody in particular.

"Christine, wait, wait," Tom interrupted hastily.

She stared down at the carpet on the floor, as though memorizing its pattern. "Okay," she mumbled.

"Bullshit!" Anthony suddenly exploded. "Nobody would have knocked Clinton's brains out because of some stupid secret!"

"I agree," said Tom peaceably. "Look at these cards. Enough to make us squirm, sure. Enough to remind us of just how nasty Clinton could be, sure. But enough to kill him? No."

"Do let us see your card, old man," urged Philip with old-school-tie suavity.

Tom picked his card up from the table and flipped it over. It landed face up. Everyone got up to look.

YOU are a
HIT-AND-RUN KILLER

"Hit-and-Run Killer?" Philip's brows drew together in a perplexed frown. He tugged gently on his lower lip.

"That's what I call a sick joke," said Alice flatly, turning away. The others murmured their agreement.

Tom shook his head. "Clinton always took his games seriously," he reminded them. "He wouldn't have spoiled this with a joke. No, it seems clear enough. He believed one of us guilty of a hit-and-run killing."

Alice turned back slowly, her slanted eyes alight with comprehension. "Sheila," she said.

"And so the game was Clinton's revenge . . ." prompted Philip.

"On . . ." Anthony turned to Tom.

"The person whom he believed—but couldn't

prove—to be guilty of Sheila's death," stated Tom, his voice heavy with conviction. "On the last night, Saturday, my turn, he was going to pull the plug on that person."

"How do you know?" asked Philip with great earnestness.

"He told me yesterday, when he gave me the pill for my back."

The room fell silent, a pall of credibility hanging over all of them, leaving them with nothing to say, not daring to follow Tom's path of reasoning all the way down to where the ground grew shaky beneath their feet and a bloody swamp of unwelcome answers lapped at their ankles and threatened to pull them under.

"Okay," Christine shrilled. "What's everybody waiting for?" She stood up, tossing back her mop of hair with a shake of her head. "Let's all run around in a circle!" She placed her hands on her hips, eyeing the rest of them. Nobody moved. "I mean, this *is* musical chairs? Isn't it musical chairs?" she persisted.

"In Tom's mind, anyway," said Philip.

"Right!" cried Alice a shade too loudly. "It's just Tom's damn fantasy."

They all looked expectantly at Tom, begging him with their eyes to admit that it was his fantasy, dreamed up for their entertainment by an acknowledgedly clever writer.

"Then take a card," he said simply. Nobody moved. Tom took a deep breath. "Okay, I'll start," he said. Reaching over to the table, he drew the Homosexual card toward himself, leaving it at the

table edge. He turned to his wife, lowering his voice. "I never told you this," he said, smiling gently at her stricken face. Turning back to the others, he spoke more loudly. "I had a thing, I guess you could call it that, with Clinton, after Sheila's death. It wasn't much more than me feeling sorry for him. It didn't last long. It's in the past now, and more than ever *right* now." Again he sought his wife's eyes. Lee looked steadily at him.

"Believe me," Tom continued, "it was just some . . . door . . . that opened and I went in. But I didn't like the air in there." He stopped, with nothing more to say.

Alice started to speak, but Anthony interrupted her with an "Excuse me, darling." To Tom, he said, "But am I just being slow? Are you saying, are you *claiming* that 'secret,' that Homosexual card, meaning that you're in the clear? Well, I don't know about the rest of you," he gestured widely with an angry hand, "and I'm in no position to challenge your little story, charming as it was, but it's also possible that Clinton may have come up with some dirty half-truths about *me* . . ."

Anthony turned to Philip, his upset showing clearly on his face. "Or *you?*"

"Or *you?*" he almost shouted at Lee. He groped for Alice's hand and, finding it, clutched it tightly. "Or *any* of us could have . . ." He whirled on Tom, distress and anger battling on his rugged features. "What gives you the right, the exclusive right, to that card?"

Tom stood silent for a fraction of a minute. "Fair enough," he said, meeting Anthony's outraged eyes

frankly, "I just looked at the cards and I saw only one that applied to me. Of course," he continued smoothly, "if the same thing is true of you, then that's another story, Anthony, and it may mean that Clinton's game is invalid." Anthony remained silent.

"Well?" prodded Tom.

Anthony growled threateningly, the heavy corded veins standing out like knots on his muscular arms as he clenched his fists. "Who says it's true? Who says I'm . . ."

"Nobody says you're anything," Tom cut in. "I looked at the cards and I said I was the Homosexual, that's all."

"But that was in the past," protested Alice.

"They're all in the past," Tom pointed out with the ghost of a smile. Another silence fell. He looked around the room. "Anyone want to say anything?" he invited. There were no takers; everybody looked acutely uncomfortable.

"I mean," Tom went on in his most reasonable voice, "if there ever was an 'unofficial investigation,' quote unquote, this is it, right? Or should I tell you that Lee and I once heard rumors about a shoplifting incident concerning somebody in this room?"

More silence. Alice started to speak, but she stopped herself at the final second. Tom shook his head and sighed.

"Look," he went on as gently as he could, as though he were speaking to small children. "The authorities . . ." He broke off. "But why twist any-

one's arm? As I see it," he continued patiently, "we're *in* this. Up to *here*. It's a murder, isn't it?"

A pregnant moment passed by. Then Alice suddenly reached over and slid the Shoplifter card toward herself. She brushed her long hair back from her face and lit a cigarette nervously. Then, with a shaky laugh, she began not so much to speak as to babble, not looking any of them in the eye, and punctuating her words with deep drags on her cigarette.

"Okay. Thanks. I mean it. Right. Shoplifter applies to me. It's the only one. I took a coat, blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera. Please, Anthony," she gave her husband a quick glance, "no shocked looks. When we get back to town, I'll swipe you some I.D. bracelets. You'll forget about it." Alice lapsed into silence, dragging the smoke deeply into her lungs and expelling it from her sculptured nostrils.

There was a long pause during which the proverbial dropped pin would have sounded like overtime in the boiler factory.

"Right, well," said Tom, rubbing his hands together and heading for the bar, "me for the five Scotches."

"Uh . . . Tom . . . If I may . . ." Philip's diffidence wouldn't have fooled a four-year-old.

"Sure," said Tom easily, suppressing a grin at this charade.

"That leaves the other four of us somewhat dangling, wouldn't you say?" asked Philip in his best soigné "old boy" manner.

"Unh-unh!" Christine shook her head in a definite negative. "Hello!" she chirruped brightly, leaning

forward to pounce on a card. The others turned to see it. It was the Informer card.

Christine opened her mouth for a wisecrack, then shut it again and slumped back on the couch. In a quiet, introspective voice that none of them had ever heard her use before, she began to speak, studying her hands and twisting at the rings on her fingers.

"What can I say?" she began with a shrug. "I was just a secretary then, and too eager. I dropped a few names to the House Un-American Activities Committee. They just slipped out. Then those people didn't work for a while." She stopped momentarily, chipping busily away at the polish on her thumbnail. She looked up, and around at the others, who sat or stood watching her in silence.

"Now they work," she said with a toss of her lion's-mane hairdo. "Sometimes I try to get them work. Sometimes I see them on the street. Sometimes they cross the street. So what?" she finished with a note of the old brassy Christine back in her voice. She took a deep breath when she'd finished her confession, and crossed her legs carelessly.

"There *is* one thing that confuses me," said Philip calmly.

"Shoot," Tom grinned.

"Just pursuing a thought, you understand, but as I see it, the logical person to have killed Clinton is you."

"Because—" began Tom and Philip simultaneously.

"Sorry, go ahead." Philip was ever the British gentleman.

"No, go ahead. I need some ice," said Tom. Lee

held her empty glass up to him. He took it in his other hand and strode with both glasses to the bar.

Christine was catching on slowly, like the flip side of a hit record. "Right!" she said, narrowing her eyes at Tom.

"Because," Anthony interposed in excitement, "no one else felt so threatened. You were the only one—"

"—who knew about the Hit-and-Run Killer card," Philip finished.

Tom turned to face them, smiling seriously. "I was the only one *meant* to know about it. Remember, Clinton would never have spoiled his game by giving that card to the person he thought to be the killer. Actually, I was horrified when I saw the card, and I spoke to Clinton about it. He laughed and said he'd just made up a lot of melodramatic 'secrets.' But I'm guessing that the killer overheard our conversation and understood Clinton's real motive."

Anthony laughed abruptly, without mirth, as his eye fell on the three remaining cards in the center of the table. "You're cold, Tom," he sneered. "You think it's me, don't you? Your wife was a hundred miles away, your sophisticated director friend seems cool enough . . . but I'm a little nervous. You dislike me too much."

"I have no reason to dislike you." Tom's voice was expressionless.

"I feel it, though."

"I don't think this is the moment—" began Tom.

"It's my moment." Anthony's voice was choked with emotion. "Time for my theory."

"Sure," Tom said, shrugging his shoulders casually.

"Tonight we all saw the cards for the first time. It didn't take us long to find the truth in three of them. And your mind worked fast," said Anthony resentfully, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I could almost hear you thinking as you quickly labeled Lee the Ex-Convict on some trivial charge. Arrested in an anti-war rally, suspended sentence sort of thing. And Philip can kid his way along with some witty Child Molester jokes, and that leaves me."

Anthony glared savagely around the room, like a defensive animal at bay. "Well, I've done time," he growled. "Yeah, I've been in prison twice. For . . . assault. *And* I can prove it. Can anyone else here make that particular claim?"

Lee lit up a cigarette. The room was silent, as Anthony angrily snatched up the Ex-Convict card and confronted Tom. "Disappointed?" he snarled.

Tom did not reply.

"Actually," said Philip smoothly, *"I* was arrested some years back."

"Unh-unh, love." Anthony shook his head in denial. "See that card? Not just arrested. Arrested is quite different."

Lee snuffed her cigarette out after one unsatisfactory puff. She stood up and walked quickly over to the bar, where she poured herself a stiff drink without ice. Tom looked at the long Newport butt in the ashtray; his eyes moved quickly to Philip, who was staring at the ashtray intently.

Tom laughed sharply, a short, nervous bark. "As a matter of fact," he said hastily, "I think we've . . . at this point, I don't think we can go any further."

"Wha . . . aat?" drawled Alice, incredulous.

"What I mean is, we've established what we set out to prove."

"What *is* this?" Anthony demanded to know.

"I mean . . ." stammered Tom, "we're agreed that all this was in . . . I mean, we can't . . . we can't draw any ironclad conclusions. It's all theoretical." He tried to smile, but failed miserably.

Anthony grimaced, his mood turning ugly. "Fine. It's theoretical, but hardly fair to stop now, Johnny." Turning, he confronted Philip. "How about it? Philip?" he jeered. "Care to choose from what's left?"

Philip looked silently at the two cards that remained. YOU are a LITTLE CHILD MOLESTER; YOU are a HIT-AND-RUN KILLER. They stared up at him like invitations to a funeral.

"Come on," Anthony mocked him roughly. "Dented fenders, or a little petting in the playground?"

Philip pulled at his lower lip, not answering a word. He could feel their eyes on the back of his neck, their glances burning into the base of his skull. He hesitated, then exchanged looks with Tom, who flinched like a whipped dog. Silence hung between them.

"Everybody stop!" Christine gave an involuntary jump at the sound of Lee's voice. Lee stood at the top of the interior stairway, looking at them with her

dark liquid eyes. She was a little drunk, and held onto the bannister to keep from falling as she spoke to the startled onlookers.

"By which I only mean, just please . . . let me get this over with . . ." Her words slurred just a little, from a combination of liquor and choked emotion.

Tom looked at his wife, anguish apparent in his eyes. "Honey . . ." he pleaded.

"I was drunk," Lee recited as if by rote. "I was too drunk to drive." She looked like a sleepwalker, her huge eyes ringed with shadows, her pale clothing in disarray around her slim body.

Tom started toward her at a half-run. Her hands tightened on the bannister, the knuckles whitening with the force of her grip.

"*No.* Tom!" It was a cry of pain, wrung out of her deepest places. "Please, please stay there. I'm so sorry I never told you. You would have helped me do the right thing, but I just couldn't. I drove down the coast to the party. I overshot the driveway." Her eyes burned like coals in her pale face. "I didn't even see her," Lee cried out, anguished. "The car skidded. I panicked. I turned around and drove back to Santa Barbara. Next morning I left you the note about having to visit my school friend and I drove as far away as I could. Vegas. I traded cars at the rental place and drove home that afternoon."

Lee swayed slightly, then pulled herself upright again, her eyes seeking, imploring Tom across the room. "I've lived with it so long," she moaned. "But I thought I was safe—until the game. It was things

you said, Tom—I started thinking and I looked at your card. And—"

She knelt in the penitent's box, her cowl drawn over her head, her flashlight illuminating her haunted face.

"I know the point of the game," she said.

Clinton leaned back wearily, his sharp features in profile.

"Do you?" he whispered through the grille that separated them.

"It's vicious!"

"Thank you."

"I want you to stop it," she begged.

"Go away." His whisper was infinitely weary, infinitely disgusted.

"Why did you wait till now?" she asked.

His whisper changed to a hiss, like the sudden striking of a serpent. "I only found out last week. Remember Harry's Rent-A-Car? Las Vegas? I happened to meet Harry. That was the point of the game."

Lee stiffened, her lovely features distorted by anger and anguish. Clinton's bitchy whisper went on and on, as though he were dishing mere gossip. "He said he hoped you weren't still worried about the damage to the car."

"The car, that goddamn car," Lee moaned. "I couldn't control it. It was all over the road . . ."

"It was lazy of the police not to look for an out-of-town car," Clinton remarked almost conversationally. He was obviously enjoying Lee's misery, wringing every drop of savor out of her anguish.

"Please don't call the police, Clinton," she begged

without shame, but cringing inside at her helplessness. "I'll do anything you—"

"The harder you hold a secret in, the more it wants to get out. See you Saturday."

"Please, Clinton, don't make me . . . don't drive me, Clinton . . . Don't!" she wept. "Don't do it. It was an acci—"

Clinton slammed the panel shut.

Reaching up with desperate hands, Lee clawed at the grille. The panel did not open again. "Clinton! Please!" she whispered in despair, knowing that it was hopeless.

Lee rose and hurried from the box, running around to the front door of the priest's box and tugging at the handle, trying to force the door open. Clinton's hand held the door firmly shut.

"Clinton! . . . Clinton! I mean it!" she yelled, half out of her mind with fear. She banged on the door with her heavy flashlight. Fearful of the loud noise, she glanced behind her at the chapel door. To her relief, it appeared solid.

For the first time, Lee noticed the heavy iron candlestick standing nearby. She dropped her flashlight; its beam slashed across the bottom of the priest's door. Using all her strength, she lifted the heavy candleholder in both hands. The beeswax candle fell to the floor. Using it as a weapon, Lee started battering the priest's box with it, crying and out of control, her voice growing louder and more shrill. "Clinton!"

The lightning flash lit up the chapel for a fraction of a second, revealing a glimpse of the wigged and

rouged head in the slit between the curtains behind the lathed grille. Lee lifted the heavy candlestick with an extraordinary strength, and smashed it into the grille with all her might.

"Clinton!" she shrieked.

The wrought iron candleholder had smashed completely through the front grille of the priest's box. With an effort, Lee moved the heavy thing upright again. As the front door was relieved of the weight of it, it swung open. Clinton's body slumped out from behind the door and fell heavily to the chapel floor. The blood poured from his crushed head. Lee dropped the candelabrum, letting it clatter noisily to the floor.

The rumble of thunder died away, leaving her alone in the chapel, alone with a dead man.

Lee sighed deeply and opened her eyes. "It's funny," she said plaintively, "I'm so tired. Hey, Tom, you're so smart, except you thought it couldn't be me. He wouldn't stop whispering. He told me over and over." She brushed a lock of dark hair off her forehead with the back of her hand, like a little girl. "He was so mean." Her voice trailed off.

In an anguished whisper, Tom said, "Lee, you don't have to—"

"Do me one thing, don't everybody jump on me," Lee pleaded with a small, tired smile. "I just want to make a clean exit down these stairs by myself." She waved a hand in mock cheeriness. "Don't worry, everybody, I'm okay . . ."

Lee lifted the bottle of bourbon off the bar and walked away down the stairs. She wasn't swaying now, and her slender back was very straight.

You are

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H I T - A N D - R U N

K I L L E R

CHAPTER IX

They watched her go in stunned silence, each of them struck by the tragic waste and futility of the whole affair. First Sheila, in a drunken accident, next Clinton, the victim of his own evil games, and now Lee . . .

Philip turned to Tom sympathetically, addressing him in a low voice. "Sorry, Tom, but I must say that 'clean exit' line bothers me."

Tom blanched as the realization struck home. "Oh, no!" he cried, running across the room to the stairway and disappearing down it. He dashed down the corridor of the cabin deck, stopping in front of his wife's room. He tried the door. It was locked.

"Lee! Lee!" he shouted urgently, pounding on her door with the flat of his hand. "Lee, open up!" There was no answer.

Swiftly, he ran into his own cabin and threw open

the door of the connecting bathroom. But the other door, on Lee's side, was locked as well.

"Goddamn it, Lee, unlock this door or I'll break it down."

Lee's voice came lazily through the bathroom door, her speech slurred by alcohol. "Hey, I like you," she said, "but go away. Let me get myself together in here, okay? I want a nap. I'll feel better. Then we'll talk about all kinds of stuff. Not right now, Tom, but I'm okay. Swear to God, I'm okay."

Tom listened carefully. "All right, darling, if you say so. I'll come back in a little while." He waited for her answer, but she made none. "Okay?" he asked again and stood thoughtfully, staring at the door for a long moment. Then he turned and left.

Alice and Anthony leaned on the deck rail outside the lounge, peering wordlessly into the gray water below. Tom entered the lounge and eyed the couple outside, standing where he could get a good view of them. Then he moved to join Christine and Philip, who sat close together in armchairs.

"Is she all right?" asked Philip with deep and real concern.

"The door's locked, but she talked to me. She just wants to be alone." Tom's face was a mask of self-reproach. "I'm so . . . It never occurred to me . . ." Biting his lip, he broke off.

"You thought it was Anthony?" asked Christine.

Tom shrugged his shoulders, holding his hands out helplessly. "I don't even know *what* I thought."

Anthony stepped in from the deck, and Tom approached him. He held out his hand. "I'm sorry if—" he began.

"Don't be." Anthony shook hands with him. "You have other things to worry about." He walked past the bar and down the stairs. Tom stepped out on deck and stood a few feet away from Alice. Both of them stared unseeing at the harbor.

Christine watched him sympathetically. "Is there anything we can do, I wonder?" she asked Philip.

"Let me know what you come up with."

Alice and Anthony and Christine sat cozily in the large, bright, and well-stocked galley. Dinner had been over for hours—with no sign of Lee or Tom—and now they were hungry again, Anthony with the munchies, and Christine as usual. On the table in front of them was a bottle of rich French milk; to accompany it they wolfed down gigantic pieces of chocolate layer cake.

"You could stick this cake fork in my hand. I wouldn't feel it, I'm so devastated," declared Christine, rolling her eyes.

Anthony turned to his wife. "I'll call the agency and negotiate your release the minute we get home. We'll make me the heavy." Alice nodded, her mouth full of cake.

"And don't tell him you're signing with me," Christine warned. "He still hates me from when I took Rod Steiger away from him. God, what a sick business," she groaned, clutching at her bosom, near where she imagined her heart to be.

Philip walked in just in time to hear the groan

and see the clutch. "Are you all right?" he enquired.

"I'll never get over it. Alice just told me the deal her ex-agents made for her on the Douglas picture, and I'm in shock. We'll get them, honey," she promised her new client. Christine turned back to Philip. "How's Tom?"

"He says he doesn't want to eat."

Christine gestured belowdecks, pantomiming the cabins.

"Not a sound." Philip shook his head. "He's been down there half a dozen times."

"She probably passed out, huh?" Anthony asked.

"I never knew she was a boozer," said Alice.

Philip rocked his hand from side to side expressively.

"She was A.A. for a while," nodded Christine sagely.

Tom came into the galley, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, a look of despondency on his face. Christine held up a plateful of cake, but Tom shook his head no.

"Still locked," he said in a depressed voice. "And she doesn't answer."

"I'm sure the captain has a master key," said Philip.

Tom pulled from his pocket a key attached to a large wooden tag and held it up for them to see. "I just got it from him, but *should* I wake her? I don't know." He shook his dark head in indecision.

"Want me to go with you?" offered Christine.

Tom shook his head again. "Thanks," he declined. He left morosely, without another word.

"Quite a change in him since this afternoon," gloated Anthony with no small relish.

"Oh, Anthony," Alice snapped. "Cool it for just once, will you?"

Tom turned the master key quietly in the lock of Lee's door. The lock turned, and the door opened. The little cabin was dark, the porthole closed, but in the dim light that drifted in from the corridor Tom could see a form huddled in a corner of the narrow bunk. He took a quiet step forward, calling softly into the darkness.

"Lee, darling. Lee?"

He came up to the bed, and touched his wife gently on the shoulder. She groaned and turned over, but didn't open her eyes. Her breath came deeply and regularly. She was out like a light.

Tom stopped and picked up the half-empty bourbon bottle from the floor, regarding it with distaste. He sighed, set his jaw, and began to unscrew the porthole window.

Philip stood alone on the rear deck, contemplating the night with mixed emotions. He turned his head at the sound of a porthole being opened below him. Going to the rail, he leaned over, watching the liquid being poured out and the bottle hitting the water. His brows knitted in a puzzled frown as he saw the bourbon bottle floating away on the choppy wavelets.

Their snack completed and their business con-

cluded, Christine, Anthony, and Alice came out on deck to partake of the ambiguities of the evening.

"When I saw her in the chapel," Christine was babbling, "murder was scrawled all over her face. God! When I write my autobiography, *that* line's gonna need help."

"I felt undercurrents all evening," declared Anthony solemnly.

"*Now* you felt undercurrents all evening," jeered his wife.

Christine shuddered, as though a goose had just waddled across her sepulchre. "Something told me it was going to be a bummer in there . . . That door creaking open and Clinton getting so physical. And then that awful faraway look in his eyes . . ." She shuddered again, impressed by her own participation in the fatal drama.

Philip stood apart from them, silent at the rail, allowing their conversation to only partially penetrate his consciousness. With narrowed eyes, he stared thoughtfully at the empty bottle, bobbing, bobbing on the sea. His hand came up and tugged gently at his lower lip.

Exhausted from the long and emotionally wearing day, Tom lay sprawled out asleep on the sofa in the lounge, an empty glass standing on the floor beside his hand. It was very late. Philip sat near him in an armchair, staring fixedly at the remains of the "evidence"—the stick of wood and the cigarette butt—that lay before him on the table. He was trying to put the whole thing together in his mind, so far without much success.

"Tom?" he called softly. "Tom?" There was no response from the sleeping man. Philip got up quietly and left the lounge.

The captain's office was deserted for the night. Philip came in silently and, spotting the passkey hanging on a wall hook above the desk, lifted it off and left as quickly and as quietly as he'd come.

"Lee! Lee!" Philip called urgently outside her door, rapping the wood with his knuckles. When he got no answer, he inserted the master key in the lock, and opened it. Lee's cabin was deserted, her bunk empty. He stood for a minute, then used the key again to unlock the door to the connecting bathroom. It, too, was empty. He walked through it into Tom's room. Empty. Philip stood puzzled for a minute, gathering his thoughts. Then he stepped back out into the corridor.

There was a light showing underneath Christine's door despite the lateness of the hour. Philip tapped on it.

"Who is it?" called Christine.

Philip pushed the door open. Wearing a low-cut, transparent nightie, Christine was sitting up in bed, her face made up carefully, her hair attractively brushed and tumbling down her shoulders and into her impressive cleavage. About forty dollars' worth of Joy perfumed her flesh and overwhelmed Philip's nasal passages as he stepped inside.

At the foot of the bed sat Guido, the teenage cabin boy. He was wearing, in addition to very tight jeans, a tank top stenciled on the back with the word "Sheila." He and Christine were playing cards. As

Philip entered the cabin, Guido gave a guilty start and flushed a deeper tan.

"Sorry," said Philip.

"It's okay," burbled Christine. "Have you met my fiancé?" She waved a manicured paw at the blushing boy.

"Seen Lee?"

"No," said Christine, her forehead creasing in a sudden frown, "is there anyth—"

Philip stepped out quietly and closed the door. He looked across the corridor at Alice's and Anthony's door. No light showed. He turned and hurried upstairs.

Philip laid a rough hand on Tom's shoulder, shaking him urgently. Tom came awake on the instant, sitting up and shaking his head to clear it.

"What? What is it?"

"Lee's not in her room," said Philip tersely.

Tom frowned. "Where is she?"

"Not in your room. Not with Christine. Alice and Anthony are asleep." He looked seriously down at Tom, the lines of his mouth grim and set. Tom sprang immediately to his feet and followed Philip on the run down to the cabin deck.

They checked Lee's cabin again. Nothing. Only a faint light streamed in from the open porthole, but they could see that the room had not been disturbed.

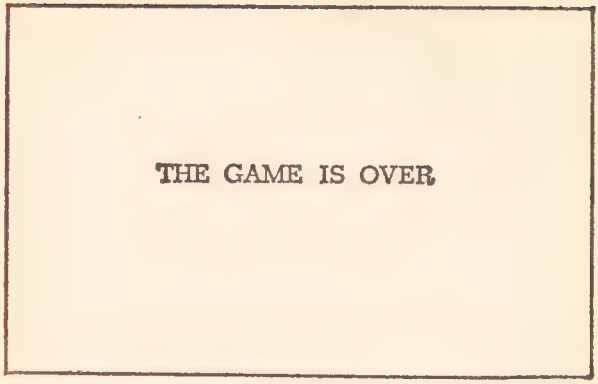
"What do we do?" asked Philip.

Tom shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. Wake the captain. Search the ship."

They split up outside Lee's cabin, Tom dashing up the stairs to the upper decks. Philip stood in the

corridor thinking, then, as if on an impulse, he walked down the hall and opened the door to Clinton's stateroom. He took in the large empty room at a glance and was turning to go when his attention was caught by the door to Clinton's private bathroom. It stood slightly ajar. Hesitating a fraction of a second, Philip walked over to it and opened it all the way.

Lee lay naked in the bathtub, her black hair trailing in the blood-red water, her face paler than usual, exsanguinated and cold as Parian marble. Her slender arms lay draped over the sides of the tub, and the sight of the gaping slits in her wrists, like hungry little mouths, wrenched at Philip's heart and caused his face to crumple. Through sudden tears, he saw the nail-scissors glistening metallically on the floor near the tub, their sharp points stained dull brown by the dried blood that once had given her lovely body life.



CHAPTER X

Anthony was shooting home movies, a perpetual souvenir of this pleasure cruise. He zoomed in on the back of the police van as the second of the two tagged bodies was slipped into the open back doors. Sirens wailing, the van sped up the dock and on into Cannes. Anthony lowered his Super 8, satisfied that he'd immortalized the moment.

Christine and Alice stood at the rail next to him, staring down at the busy French harbor, watching as the van drove off with Clinton and Lee, united so ironically now in death.

"How old do you think she was?" asked Alice.

"Don't think about it," Anthony comforted her automatically.

"Thirty-five? Thirty-seven?" she persisted.

Neither Christine nor Anthony felt the need to reply.

"I hope you're around if I die," said Alice, looking sadly up at Anthony with fear showing behind her eyes. Anthony turned to go.

"Wait a minute," called Alice.

"I don't like getting morbid." He walked down the wood-and-chrome gangplank to the dock.

"Well," shrugged Alice, "I sure hope someone's around." She turned to Christine. "Is it terrible?" she asked. "Is it really terrible to wonder if I can get an appointment with a hairdresser in this town?"

Vittorio brought a generous load of hand luggage up from the cabins and out onto the deck.

"Oh, Christine, do you need all that for just one night on shore?"

"Darling, I've always dreamed of being interrogated in a damp cellar by some brutal slob with steel teeth, and I want to look my best tomorrow morning."

Anthony stormed back up the gangplank, fuming. "What is this, a taxi strike?" he growled in irritation. "If we don't get to the Majestic, they'll give our rooms away. I'll be right back." He set off down the gangplank again.

"Plus," continued Christine, almost purring, "Guido said he'd take me dancing tonight if I'd pay the check. Wasn't that dear?" She waltzed over to the pile of luggage and began sorting out her own for Guido to carry down to the dock.

Tom stepped out on the deck, carrying only a small overnight bag. Alice, standing alone at the rail, saw him and walked over, resting a sympathetic hand for one moment on his shoulder.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Tom nodded. "I know. You free later?" He took her arm.

"And by the way, darling, thanks for leaving out the—you know, about us—yesterday." She smiled her gratitude.

Tom inclined his head. "Well, I thought—"

"—that there was enough flak in the air already, right? Well, there is." She turned her lovely face up to his; her eyes were slanted exactly like a jungle cat's.

"Look," Alice whispered, "let's cool it for a while. Aside from the press angle, let's be honest with each other. I admit that *your* being available and my *not* being . . ." She slitted her eyes, allowing him to see the full sweep of her lashes as they curved onto her slender cheek. "It's not the same. Listen, you'll always be the world's most attractive man . . ." Her eyes widened. "God!" she exclaimed. "What a thought I just had."

"Namely?" Tom surveyed her performance with cynical detachment, but inwardly he was furious.

"If you get married again, give me a ring. Isn't that awful?"

Philip came out on the deck; Tom quickly removed his hand from Alice's arm, uncertain whether Philip had seen them. Philip had.

A taxicab screeched up the dock to the gangplank. Anthony stuck his head out of the taxi window and yelled for Alice. "Come on, hon!"

Hurrying down the gangplank, Alice fluttered her fingers back in the direction of Philip and Tom, calling to them over one shapely shoulder, "See you tomorrow!" She and Christine climbed into the cab

beside Anthony and drove off in the direction of town.

"Goodbyes after an ocean voyage are always so sad," mocked Philip. Tom smiled ruefully, staring out to sea.

"Whose fault is all this?" he mused aloud. "Clinton's? Lee's? Mine? Or Sheila's for being a tough broad who liked to wander around Bel Air at two in the morning?" He shrugged, turning back to Philip. "Does that make any sense?"

"Nothing makes any sense. And something Clinton said keeps rattling around in the back of my head—if I could remember it."

Tom snapped himself out of this pursuit of vain regrets. "You be at the Majestic?"

Philip made an expressive gesture of empty hands. "My invitation was for a week on a yacht. I didn't bring pocket money."

"I'll see you tomorrow, I guess." Tom bounded down the gangplank and started off on foot down the dock.

It had been a long, hard day of questions and answers and Tom was in no mood for company. That was the reason he took to the crowded streets; nowhere can a man be more solitary than in a crowd of pleasure-seekers.

Cannes was at the height of the tourist season, and the cafés and promenades were jammed, especially at night. The traffic down here in the waterfront district was worse than the Santa Monica freeway, thought Tom moodily as he brushed past what seemed like thousands of bodies and dodged around

hundreds of cars. Once he passed Vittorio in the crowd, arm in arm with a very attractive young girl. They exchanged cordial waves, no more. Strolling around aimlessly, Tom hardly noticed that his wanderings were carrying him closer and closer to the waterfront itself.

Suddenly he found himself at the end of the sidewalk, near to the jetty where the yachts were anchored, their sterns to the harbor, their bows pointing like setters' noses out to sea. In the middle distance, Tom could see the *Sheila* in her anchorage. As he watched, the light coming from the lounge went out. A moment later, it came back on again.

Puzzled, Tom walked out onto the pier, approaching the *Sheila*. The light went out again, and Tom started up the gangplank. He stepped quietly around to the side passageway, trying to see through the porthole into the lounge. No light showed inside. The corridor, too, was dark. Opening the lounge door, Tom slipped quietly inside, closing the door behind him. He stood against the wall in the dark, his heart pounding.

"Anthony?" It was Philip's voice.

"It's Tom. What's going on here?"

The lamp was switched on, revealing Philip sitting at the table. Spread out in front of him were the cigarette butt, the piece of wood, and the stateroom key. On a tray on the floor near his feet were several burned-out cigarettes. Each of them bore a similar shape to the strange butt they had found in the priest's box. One of the butts was still burning.

"Well, Jesus," exclaimed Tom, "are you waiting for the other members of your coven, or what?"

"I've been calling your hotel," Philip replied briskly. "Something's not at all right."

"What are you doing?" Tom sat down at the other side of the table.

"Experimenting." Philip pointed to the cigarette butt on the table. "Look at this cigarette. It's what I went down to ask Lee about last night. Afterwards, I dismissed it from my mind as a whim. But tonight . . ."

Tom continued to look blank.

"It's the shape," Philip pointed out. He lit another cigarette.

"Funny, that bothered me, too," said Tom.

Philip tossed the lighted cigarette at Tom's feet under the table. "Stamp it out," he ordered.

After a baffled moment, Tom obeyed, finding it awkward.

Philip lit a fresh cigarette. "Now," he said, turning off the light suddenly, "try this one." He tossed it at Tom's feet, where it lay glowing in the darkness. "Just once," he ordered, "quickly!"

Tom fumbled around with his foot, attempting to stamp it out although he could hardly see it. Philip snapped the light back on. The cigarette was still burning, but the filter had been crushed.

"Let it burn out," said Philip. "You see, if it's dark and it's awkward for you, you may stamp out the *filter* instead of the lit end."

"If you only have one shot at it," Tom agreed.

"As Clinton did?" Philip mused to himself more than Tom.

"Clinton?" Tom didn't attempt to cover his surprise.

"It was *in* the box where he was killed, after all."

As Tom started to interrupt, Philip held up his hand. "Bear with me." He picked up the piece of wood and showed it to Tom.

"Remember, we both thought this came from the priest's grille. It doesn't. That wood was lathed. This is plain. It's from the side grille. How did it find its way into Clinton's robe?"

"Someone broke the grille," ventured Tom. Then he realized the importance of his words. "You're saying 'who'?"

Philip nodded. "Could we be shy one actor in the piece?"

Tom began to think out loud. "Meaning someone who saw the whole thing . . ."

"None of this would seem quite so sinister if it weren't for this." He held up the master key. "I didn't think about it till this afternoon. We found Lee in Clinton's stateroom. But *her* cabin was locked from the outside. How could she have locked it behind her when the only key to the cabins was up here in this very lounge?"

"She probably went into the john and out through my cabin," said Tom.

"No." Philip's tone was decisive. "The bathroom was bolted from the inside. I had to unbolt it myself."

Tom stood up and went to the bar. "There's got to be some explanation . . ."

"The point is," said Philip, "anyone could have taken the key last night."

Standing at the bar, Tom tried absently to break some of the melted-together ice with his hand. When that didn't work, he looked around the bar, picked up the heavy bottle-opener and began hammering at the ice.

"Then again," Philip continued, with a sigh, "maybe Clinton broke the grille, nobody else was there, and I'm just puttering my way through the debris of my rusty imagina—" He stopped short, staring at the ice bucket.

Kneeling, Philip turned Clinton over slightly. There was dried blood on the back of his cowl.

"Tom . . ."

"What?" He was dropping ice into two glasses.

"He wouldn't stop whispering," moaned Lee.

"Where's the ice pick?"

Philip hammered at the ice with the heavy bottle-opener.

"Huh?"

"I said, where's the bloody ice pick?" Philip was on his feet now, his face flushed and ruddy with excitement.

"I don't know. It must be—"

"It's been missing since yesterday afternoon!" Philip shouted.

". . . and that awful faraway look in his eyes," Christine said.

Tom finished mixing the drinks and brought one over to Philip. The older man's eyes were gleaming with discovery.

"Tom, the *back* of Clinton's cowl was stained with blood!"

Instantly, the younger man caught his excitement. "Of course! You can't strike a man in the face and the back of the neck with the same blow!"

Philip's face shone with triumph. "Lee only *thought* she'd killed Clinton."

"Did the police— ?" began Tom.

"Why bother? She'd confessed." Philip raised his glass to his lips and took a long swallow. "Thomas, we've lost our touch. A good director and a good detective ought to pay more attention to detail. *Detail . . .*" He smiled broadly. "We're ready for the final cut."

Tom took a deep breath, his mind racing. "Okay. Whoever was watching— "

"Allow *me!*" interrupted Philip, pleased as Punch with himself. "The important moment happened *before* Lee went into that room."

The cowled figure in the left-hand penitent's box lit a cigarette.

"Whoever it was lit a cigarette and dropped it through the grille . . ."

"Hey!" yelled Clinton as the burning cigarette dropped through the broken grille and landed near his feet. He leaned down to stamp it out, but the darkness of the box and its cramped quarters made it very awkward.

". . . and as Clinton leaned down to stamp it out . . ."

The shadowy figure raised the ice pick high, a handkerchief wrapped around the handle, and smashed forward through the grille. The long, narrow shaft, with its razor-sharp point, entered Clin-

ton's neck halfway between the back and the side, biting deep, up to the hilt. Clinton squirmed and fought in desperation born of terror, but the robed figure held him down until the body lay still.

". . . whoever it was stabbed him in the back of the neck with the ice pick. Then I assume he started to leave the field . . ."

The figure hurried to the chapel door, unbolting it.

"But the timing was unlucky."

A long, low rumble of thunder made her shiver. Looking up at the sky, Christine wisecracked, "Just give us the news, please." The figure jumped back from the chapel door in a panic, as Christine started to push her way in.

"Christine was chattering last night about the game."

". . . that door creaking open and Clinton getting so physical . . ."

"The door *was* open when *I* entered that room," said Philip.

"Me, too," cried Tom, excited. "Clinton wanted it to be open all the time, so everybody could hear the tape."

"Exactly," Philip concurred. "Who'd closed it? Why did it 'creak' open for Christine?"

"Because he was trying to get *out*."

"Exactly," said Philip again. "He was compelled to improvise."

The murderer moved toward the penitent's box on the right. Christine could not see his face, because the heavy candleholder was in the way, and

because the softly cursing figure held its cowl closely to its face.

"He impersonated Clinton, but the grille he'd smashed meant he couldn't let her into the left side, so . . ."

Tugging at the right-hand side with all its strength, the hooded figure gave it a mighty yank. The door came open, scraping along the floor, then it stopped, sticking in an open position.

". . . he forced open the door at the opposite end."

"All right? Now what? Who's the fag?" The figure beckoned her to the box on the right, heading himself for the priest's box in the middle. But he passed the priest's door and scurried around to the left-hand penitent's box, entering it.

"He might have hoped to make a run for it, but the sprung door meant that Christine would have an easy view of anyone sneaking out of the chapel . . ."

Twisting her head, she looked over her shoulder through her door. "Don't leave me," she whined. "Clinton? I hate being scared. Don't scare—"

"I happened to notice that, when we discovered the body."

The murderer reached through the broken grille with his left hand. The ice pick was buried up to the hilt in Clinton's neck. Using it as a handle, the figure hauled the body upright, sitting it up again. Turning the corpse's face toward Christine and holding Clinton steady with his left hand, he slid the panel open with his right.

Christine lowered her voice to an excited whisper. "Then Alice has the Homosexual card . . . ?"

The murderer twisted Clinton's head slightly so that it leaned back. "Just keep your voice down and get the hell out."

"This is just the best game I've ever—" The panel slid shut with a bang.

"The moment Christine left, he intended to duck out as soon as he safely could."

She left the box, giving a little start as she saw the cowled figure standing silently in the chapel doorway. "Oh, darling, it's brilliant!"

"But the timing continued to be unlucky."

"Clinton?" Quietly, Lee closed the chapel door and bolted it. The murderer sat motionless in the penitent's box.

"He was trapped. She wouldn't leave until she'd had a showdown with Clinton. So he drove her into a state of hysteria, convinced that she'd panic and run. He was taking a chance, of course. She might have raised her voice enough to attract attention. Then again, the door was closed and, as Clinton, he could always threaten to expose her."

Lee rose and hurried from the box, running around to the front door of the priest's box and tugging at the handle, trying to force the door open. The murderer's right hand held the door firmly shut. With its left, the figure shoved Clinton's head close to the curtain at the front.

"But God was on the murderer's side . . . for the moment . . . and Lee presented him with the best possible solution. She exploded."

The lightning flash lit up the chapel for a fraction of a second, revealing a glimpse of the wigged and

rouged head in the slit between the curtains behind the lathed grille. Lee lifted the heavy candlestick with an extraordinary strength, and smashed it into the grille with all her might.

"Clinton!" she shrieked.

The wrought iron candleholder had smashed completely through the front grille of the priest's box. With an effort, Lee moved the heavy thing upright again. The murderer let go of the door, and it began to swing open. The figure pulled the ice pick from Clinton's neck and crouched down, disappearing into the blackness below the grille. Clinton's body slumped out from behind the door and fell heavily to the chapel floor. The blood poured from his crushed head.

"She killed a dead man," said Tom, stunned.

"And needlessly committed sui—" Philip stopped in mid-sentence. The two men looked at each other in horror and disbelief.

"Somebody killed my wife," Tom spoke tonelessly. Then, with a grim face, he rallied. "Not Christine . . . Alice? . . . Anthony . . ." Thunderstruck, he managed to gasp out, "Oh, my God!"

"What?" asked Philip, startled.

"Hold on," shouted Tom. "I'll be right back." He rushed out, leaving Philip to sit alone with his surprise and puzzlement.

Belowdecks, in the spacious stateroom that had been assigned to Alice and Anthony, Tom rummaged desperately through the bureau drawers, flinging their contents helter-skelter.

Philip stood at the bar, adding ice cubes to his glass. As he reached for the whisky bottle, his eye

fell on the Polaroid photograph Clinton had tacked up on the bulletin board that first day.

"I like any game where you don't have to move," remarked Philip.

"Well, you don't have to move for this one," said Clinton. "If you're smart enough."

Philip ripped the photo off the board, exultant. Quickly, he looked around the room, searching for the final piece of evidence.

Tom slammed the last drawers shut and stood up, scowling furiously. Suddenly, his attention was caught by the menagerie of stuffed animals Alice kept strewn on the bed. He reached for the two hand puppets, and stuffed them in his pockets.

Locating the wastebasket, Philip rummaged through it, overturning it. From out of the rubbish on the floor, he carefully picked the "secret" cards. Carrying them over to the table, he spread them out, studying them intently. The lounge was perfectly quiet, except for the clock's ticking. Philip didn't observe the shadowy figure that glided by the porthole above his head, moving silently in the direction of the rear deck.

Alice tried to sneak a peek at Philip's card, but he caught her at it, and pressed the card close to his chest. Tom began to crumple his card, but Clinton hastily stopped him.

"No, don't throw it away!" he ordered. "You keep them until Saturday . . ."

"Just so long as you're fit on Saturday, which is your biggie . . ."

"Saturday," repeated Tom softly to himself . . .

"She was A.A. for a while," nodded Christine sagely . . .

"If you're smart enough . . ."

In the captain's empty office, a hand lifted the passkey off the hook, and, carrying it silently, locked the doors, one by one, that led into the lounge, trapping Philip inside. Oblivious, Philip leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply, letting the smoke drift slowly from his nostrils as he furrowed his brow in concentration.

Philip came out on the deck; Tom quickly removed his hand from Alice's arm.

Still lost in thought, Philip walked slowly back to the bar. He opened the bottle of Scotch and, as he poured, the gurgle of the whisky seemed to remind him of something he couldn't quite grasp . . . something locked in his memory . . . something important.

"She was A.A. for a while . . ."

The empty bottle bobbing, bobbing on the sea . . .

Philip's hand pressed down the buzzer on the bar, the one connected to the galley and the stewards' quarters. It rang faintly in the distance as Tom came up the stairs into the lounge.

"What did you find?" asked Philip.

"The beginnings of an idea," replied Tom. "You look pleased with yourself."

Philip carried his drink to the table and settled back in his chair. "I've had the beginnings of an idea, too. For a scenario." He crossed his legs elegantly and made himself comfortable, amused by Tom's look of bafflement at his change of mood.

"It's about a middle-class writer married to a beautiful and wealthy young woman."

"Is this an original or an adaptation?" Tom queried with a raised eyebrow.

"After a few years she begins to bore him—not her money, she herself. Then, while rewriting a picture in Rome, he renews his acquaintanceship with an inexperienced but not untalented young actress—"

"Aren't we getting a little off the subject?" Tom's voice held a steel edge.

Philip smiled benignly, unruffled. "I told you something had been nagging me, something Clinton had said or done? He said we didn't have to move to play the game . . . if we were 'smart enough.' And just now I noticed this." He held the Polaroid photograph out for Tom's inspection.

The little group stood smiling under the prow of the yacht. Tom studied the picture for a minute or two, then handed it back to Philip with a perplexed shrug.

"I *thought* he was being unusually finicky when he was lining us up. See anything odd?"

Tom shook his head. "What's odd?"

"Everybody's been posed under a letter," Philip exulted, very pleased with himself and very proud of his discovery. Tom bent forward to look again.

They stood posed under the letters painted on the prow. Philip under the S; Alice under the H; Lee under the E; Anthony under the I; Christine under the L and Tom under the A.

"So?" said Tom. He was clearly not impressed.

"Now," said Philip, "have a look at these 'secret'

cards." He waved his hand at where they lay spread out upon the table. "There's something peculiar about one of them."

Tom did not reply.

"Come, come, Tom," chided Philip. "Where's that puzzle mind?" He pointed his finger at the Little Child Molester card. "Little Child Molester," he explained. "*Little* Child Molester? As opposed to what? *Big* Child Molester?"

"I still don't get it."

"The word 'little.' What's it doing there?" He waited for some reply and, when Tom remained mute, he sighed impatiently. Explaining carefully, as though to a very small child, Philip continued. "The first night the Shoplifter . . ." He pushed the Shoplifter card to one side. "The second night the Homosexual." He picked up the second card and laid it carefully over the first, so that they overlapped.

"Now," Philip continued, "we don't *know* which the third was to be, but Clinton told you that the Hit-and-Run Killer was to be last . . ." He pushed that card across the table to the other side. "So let's try the Ex-Convict next . . ." He slid that card into place as Tom watched him, wordless. Philip tried to read the younger man's facial expression, but could not.

"And then, just for fun, the Informer." He added that card to the other.

"Sheila," said Tom as the pattern became clear.

Philip nodded. "God knows, he could have found other secrets for each of us. But he wanted to make a game for himself, too: how to find six secrets that

formed an appropriate acronym. The L was the only problem."

"Clever son of a bitch," Tom paid grudging tribute to the elaborateness of Clinton's game system.

"Cleverer than that," Philip conceded. "This picture showed the six of us carefully posed under the initial letter of each of our assigned 'secrets.' Something in plain view the whole week, something he could lord over us Sunday morning." He placed his forefinger on the photograph, tracing them.

"Shoplifter, Homosexual, Ex-Convict, Informer, Little Child Molester . . . . Hit-and-Run Killer?"

Smiling quizzically, Philip lifted the last card from the other side of the table and slid it into place. "But the last of 'Sheila' should be an A. Hit-and-Run doesn't begin with an A, does it, Tom?"

"A mistake," shrugged Tom.

Philip's eyes glinted. "Not Clinton's," he said. "I remembered something else about the first day: you started to crumple your card. This one"—he held up the Hit-and-Run card—"is smooth. That was dumb, Tom." Philip shook his head in mock disappointment. "What *was* your original card?"

Tom kept silent, but his eyes glowed under the heavy brows, and two spots of red appeared on his cheekbones.

"Let me make an educated guess," suggested Philip smoothly. "Something about Lee. 'Arsonist?' No, that doesn't sound like Lee. 'Adulterer?' No, that's you . . . A . . . A . . ."

"She was A.A. for a while . . ."

" 'Alcoholic'—*that's* a secret like the others. Not

too heavy, not too light. After all, Clinton was only a minor-league sadist. His aim was to make us uncomfortable, not violent. As he kept saying, it was only a game. *You* made it more than that. And you killed him."

"Why should I want to kill *Lee?*" Tom kept his voice level.

"Alice. And Lee's estate must be worth about three million."

"Five."

"You'd always known that she'd killed Sheila, hadn't you?" asked Philip.

Tom lit up a cigarette. "Sure," he shrugged, "I knew it the day I got my statement from Harry's. Dented fenders. A change of cars in Vegas. I didn't have to be a genius to put two and two together."

"Fade in," Philip joked. "Exterior Nice. Day. The Yacht. The Game." It was a mock scenario. "You get the Alcoholic card and you realize what Clinton's up to."

"Not until Alice generously told me her leopard coat story," demurred Tom modestly.

"That late?" Philip's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Anyway, it was an irresistible opportunity to get rid of your wife and your enemy with one—"

"Enemy?" Tom interrupted.

"The lover who dropped you."

"I dropped *him,"* said Tom with vehemence.

Philip agreed to the concession with a nod. "So he dropped your screenplay? The one you'd worked on for two years? The one he wouldn't produce but wouldn't give back? At any rate, selecting the ice pick, a classic woman's weapon . . ."

Tom stood at the bar in his pajamas and robe, listening to Philip and Lee on the deck outside. "And can you imagine how Tom would feel?" Lee asked. Tom's hand closed around the ice pick, and he slipped it into his pocket.

"When did you take it, I wonder . . ." mused Philip aloud. "You skipped down to expunge Clinton, type up a new card that would incriminate Lee, and toddle off to sleep soundly, to await the alarums of the morning." A sudden realization struck Philip. "Ah! I should have recognized the hatred in your face outside Clinton's door."

Tom stood grimacing outside the door of Clinton's stateroom. His hand curled tightly around the weapon; his fingers ached to use it. From under Clinton's door came muffled giggles and faint meowings. Tom turned away, murder seething in his heart. It would have to be delayed. But not for long.

"Was that to have been the moment of truth?" asked Philip with cocked eyebrow. "Alas, Clinton and Christine were having their own moment of truth. Dissolve."

Tom sat in Clinton's stateroom while the others enjoyed brunch on the deck. Rapidly, he slipped a new card into Clinton's typewritter, selecting it from the pile on the desk.

"Next day, you *did* substitute the card . . ."

He typed YOU are a HIT-AND-RUN KILLER on the card and ripped it out of the typewriter, putting it into the wallet in his trouser pocket. Then he picked up the other card, the one reading YOU are an ALCOHOLIC, and left the cabin. On the

side deck, he stopped, tore the Alcoholic card into little pieces and threw it in the sea.

". . . and arranged for Lee to see the wrong one, making her think Clinton had sadistic plans to expose her."

Philip smiled almost warmly at Tom, delighted with this opportunity to prove his superior gamesmanship. "The stage was set. She was primed, and regardless of where, when, or how the crime was committed, subsequent investigation of the cards would now point to Lee as the only person with a motive strong enough for murder. Of course, if you'd understood Clinton's acronym at all, you could so simply have replaced your 'Alcoholic' card with another A secret—Automobile Killer, for example. *But . . .*" Philip's shrug spoke volumes; it was almost Gallic.

Tom sat silent for a moment's passing. Then, rather coldly, "Would you care to explain how I started the propellers with Guido in the room?" he asked.

"No, that was *my* contribution."

Tom's dark face registered surprise. "You wanted Clinton dead, too?"

Philip nodded. "You see, I had helped Alice out of her little unpleasantness lo, these many years ago, so when we began the game looking for a Shoplifter, I knew some ugly secrets were going to be trotted out—not the least of them mine—and I wanted it stopped."

Tom leaned forward and put his cigarette out slowly and carefully. Eyeing him, Philip rose cautiously and headed for the bar.

"As you so astutely pointed out yesterday," he called back to Tom, "I blundered."

As he made his drink, he surreptitiously gave the buzzer another sharp press, raising his voice to cover the distant sound. "But it gave you courage to carry on."

Tom smiled in his most charming manner, revealing strong white teeth. "What do you think, am I going to get away with it?"

Nervously, Philip went on talking. "You pretended your back was hurting, to coax Clinton into revealing when your 'secret' was to be played."

"Just so long as you're fit on Saturday, which is your biggie."

"Saturday," repeated Tom softly to himself.

"You had to find Clinton before Lee confronted him with the false card."

Clinton was still tugging vainly at the door to the right-hand box, cursing under his breath. Tom stood in the chapel doorway watching him . . . Hastily drawing his cowl around his face, Clinton headed for the priest's box, beckoning Tom to the penitent's box on the left.

"And you proceeded to play Clinton's game . . ."

"Nothing's going right," he complained. "I'll have to open the door wider."

"As well as your own."

Tom dropped the lighted cigarette through the grille. "Hey!" yelled Clinton. Tom raised the ice pick high and smashed forward through the grille, driving it up to the hilt in Clinton's neck. Clinton struggled in terror, but Tom held the squirming body down until it lay still.

"Then you did your ventriloquist act for Christine and Lee. I should have realized . . . we've all seen you impersonate Clinton."

Tom chuckled to himself. "You know too much to live," he said.

Philip appreciated the joke, but nevertheless he edged toward the nearest door, having no idea in the world that Tom had locked them all from the outside, before he'd come up from the cabin deck by the interior stairway.

"How convenient for you that Lee exploded, but how inconvenient that she thought quickly and arranged everything to look like an accident."

Lee slipped silently out of the chapel and closed the door behind her. Tom, aching in his limbs from his long crouch in the penitent's box, frowned angrily at Clinton's body, which lay in death on the stones of the chapel floor as though accidentally struck by a falling rock.

"You must have been furious. So you rearranged everything to look like a *murder* that looked like an accident."

Tom picked up the acanthus-carved stone that Lee had used to smash Clinton's skull and carried it to the pile of rubble in the corner.

"She'd picked the right stone. You replaced it with a wrong one."

Selecting a grooved stone from the pile, Tom carried it back, lifted it high above his head, and smashed it down on Clinton's body.

"I'd wager that other stone—stained with blood—is still in the corner. As well as the cigarette that Lee actually smoked. But no matter," Philip drew to his

conclusion. "You knew that the next day, when you conducted your brilliant investigation, Lee would assume she'd made the mistake. And it *was* brilliant. What better detective than the man who committed the crime? Every hesitant conclusion, every stumbling interpretation . . . And when you suddenly panicked, 'protecting' your wife—it was dazzling, dear boy."

Philip smiled his congratulations, then sneaked a glance at his watch. "Almost midnight," he said.

Tom grinned. "Good," he said. "That gives us plenty of time. The entire crew's happily celebrating the death of their master in port."

"Aren't we lucky?" Philip's lips stretched in a thin smile. With a sinking heart, he realized that the buzzer would never be answered. Except, perhaps, too late. He affected a casualness, but he wasn't positive he was carrying it off. He could see Tom's eyes observing him closely, like a leopard watching a goat. If only he knew when the leopard would pounce!

"What's the next sequence?" Philip jested, carrying on his scenario. "Another fake suicide? I don't drink bourbon. You don't pour bourbon out of a porthole and throw the bottle overboard. You pour it down a drain. Unless there's something else you're anxious to get rid of—like seconal."

After they'd returned from the monastery, and the ship was asleep, Tom padded quietly up into the lounge, clutching Lee's sleeping capsules. With a steady hand he broke them open, one by one, and dissolved them into the amber fluid of the bourbon bottle.

"No one else on board drank bourbon, so you were safe. You'd planned the obligatory confession scene for the morning after the murder, and you knew she'd need some fortification when you started turning the screws."

Lee lay huddled in the darkened cabin, curled on the bed. A long way off, she thought she heard the door open, but she didn't have the energy to raise her drugged eyelids. She thought it was Tom . . . standing by her bed, so many thousands of light years away.

She didn't see or hear him pour the bourbon into the sea, but she roused herself a little when she felt him undressing her. Lee smiled in her stupor as she felt his hands on her naked body, felt him lift her in his strong arms. Tommy. Now it would be all right again. She wouldn't ever have to wake up to the pain with Tom here.

She opened her eyes for a second as he lowered her into the warm bath water. From somewhere she heard her own voice saying, "I'd kill myself for a hot bath, but Clinton has the only tub." She allowed herself to sink deeply into the amniotic water; it swirled her hair into seaweed and filled her eyes and mouth with coral.

She bobbed gently up to the surface again, floating. Someone—Tommy?—was holding her hands gently, turning the wrists palm upward.

Now Tom's handsome, beloved face was very near. She struggled to focus her eyes on his familiar features. As the waters lapped around her face, she wondered what he was carrying in his hand. It glittered and was cold, so cold.

Tom moved toward Philip with grim purpose. The older man backed away, his eyes widening in terror as he saw the puppets on Tom's hands, like grotesque mannequins with menacing lives of their own. Their grinning little faces sent chills through the marrow of Philip's bones. Tom extended his hands to the older man's throat.

"I couldn't find any gloves," he explained simply, and started to strangle Philip to death.

Philip struggled for his life, seizing Tom's wrists and throwing his weight against the other man's body, trying to force him to break his hold. He could feel his eyes beginning to bulge out of his head as Tom's fingers tightened on his windpipe. Terror of death gave Philip a strength he had never before possessed, and the two men rolled and bumped together against the heavy furniture in the lounge. Once they knocked a heavy table lamp to the ground and smashed it to shards.

But Tom's youth and superior strength gradually began to tell, and Philip felt his life begin to slip away from him. Above him, he saw Tom's distorted features, twisted into a mask of hatred and murder. Philip's eyesight started to grow dim, and his chest heaved with his last efforts to draw breath, so that he felt his heart would break through his ribs. The pain was unendurable.

"Will you guys knock it the hell off!" yelled Christine. "Look at this place!" She stamped furiously up the stairs from the cabin deck, in a pink satin dressing gown that outlined her ample curves, pulled tightly around her and tied with a sash.

Startled, Tom let go of Philip, who stumbled against the table.

Gingerly holding his throat, Philip tried to smile. "Actually, we've been having a little difference of opinion—" he deprecated.

Christine snorted, staring around at the shambles in the lounge. Lamps on the floor, chairs overturned, broken glass everywhere. She bent to pick up a lamp that had miraculously escaped breakage.

"Well, we've all gotten a little squirrely on this trip, but don't you think—"

"—about 'The Last of Sheila' project. But it's all straightened out now. What are you doing on board?"

"I'm trying to sleep!" she bawled indignantly. The sudden appearance of Guido on the steps, dressed only in his underwear, made Christine retract.

"Well, not exactly," she admitted. "I finally got Guido down to Clinton's stateroom . . . a big double bed . . . I want to turn on a little music, but instead I get you guys yakking on the intercom and now *la cocka e limpa.* God! She killed her, he killed him . . ." Christine made a gesture of disgust. "Dictate it tomorrow when you can get a secretary!"

"Good idea," agreed Philip, his composure entirely restored. "But we're agreed on the basics, Tom, wouldn't you say?"

Tom stood speechless. He didn't believe any of it. Not any of it.

"There are gigantic themes here," expounded Philip, taking stage center for his own. "Innocence,

guilt, hatred . . ." He looked hard at Tom, who stared numbly back . . . "Loyalty."

Philip turned back to Christine, warming her with his presence. "Lee's ambitions for Tom were such," he explained, "that we . . . survivors . . . feel bound to tell Sheila's story in all its pitiless purity. Sparing nothing."

"That means a big budget, huh?" Christine was now all ears.

Philip looked steadily at Tom. "I feel five million will cover it." Tom could utter no syllable of protest.

"Alice's price just went up, and no one can write it better than you, Tom," Christine gushed. "Who handles you, again?" Tom did not reply.

Philip shook his head very gently.

"Ah, well, you see I'm keen to have the first draft done by a complete outsider. Someone who will bring a naiveté to our little inbred circle. Tom will be needed, of course, as technical advisor and, just before shooting, for a few—"

"Rewrites," Tom said slowly, the first word he'd spoken in what seemed like years.

"Exactly," Philip approved. "Well, I think I'll turn in. I'm almost dead on my feet. So much to do tomorrow, and still a few pages to type tonight. A sealed letter to my solicitor . . . protecting the copyright . . . that sort of thing. In these perilous times, one just can't be too careful." He yawned delicately, then bowed to the lady. "Coming, Christine?"

Christine looked around to check on the whereabouts of Guido. *"Andiamo, caro,"* she purred, following Philip down the stairs.

"Honey," she purred to Philip, "let me hit you with a couple of names: Yul Brynner as Clinton, Paul and Joanne as Tom and Lee—hope it's got enough content for them . . ."

Her voice faded into the distance belowdecks, chattering rapidly. "Now who've I got for Alice? Where's June Haver these days, convent-wise? I know—Carly Simon! The soundtrack album alone'll pay for her wardrobe . . . Now, don't scream: Ronald Colman's unavailable, but *you* can dust off your wigbox and do a Hitchcock for us . . . Anthony's a problem—the part's nothing, a lot of reaction shots . . . Oh! Virna Lisi! . . . No, darling, as *me!*" Her girlish giggle wafted back faintly.

Tom sank into the sofa, staring at the photograph on the coffee table. Six smiling faces—one of them his own—stared back at him in macabre mockery, under the legend, "Sheila."

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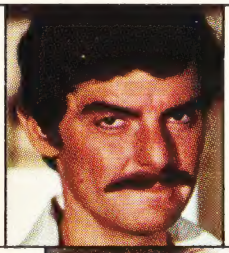

Richard Benjamin
as Tom

Dyan Cannon
as Christine

James Coburn
as Clinton

Joan Hackett
as Lee

James Mason
as Philip

Ian McShane
as Anthony

Raquel Welch
as Alice

THE LAST OF SHEILA

A Warner Bros. Production—Produced and Directed by Herbert Ross

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